



# Lake County Health Department

~Working for a healthy community~

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## NOROVIRUS OR NORWALK GENERAL INFORMATION

### What are Noroviruses?

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause the “stomach flu,” or gastroenteritis (GAS-tro-en-ter-I-tis), in people. Norovirus is also commonly known as Norwalk or the “cruise ship disease”. Viruses are very different from bacteria and parasites. They are not affected by treatment with antibiotics, and they cannot grow outside of a person’s body.

### What are the symptoms of noroviruses?

The symptoms of norovirus illness usually include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and some stomach cramping. Sometimes people also have a low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, and a general sense of tiredness. The illness often begins suddenly, and the infected person may feel very sick. The illness is usually brief, with symptoms lasting only about 1 or 2 days. In general, children experience more vomiting than do adults. Most people with norovirus illness experience both diarrhea and vomiting.

### How serious is norovirus disease?

Norovirus disease is usually not serious, although people may feel very sick and vomit many times a day. Most people get better within 1 or 2 days, and they have no long-term health effects related to the norovirus. However, sometimes people become dehydrated due to vomiting and diarrhea and may need special medical attention. Dehydration problems are usually only seen among the very young, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems. There is no evidence to suggest that an infected person can become a long-term carrier of norovirus.

### How do people become infected with noroviruses?

Noroviruses are found in the stool or vomit of infected people. People can become infected with the virus in several ways, including:

- eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus;
- touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus, and then placing their hand in their mouth;
- having direct contact with another person who is infected and showing symptoms (for example, when caring for someone with illness, or sharing foods or eating utensils with someone who is ill).

Persons working in day-care centers or nursing homes should pay special attention to children or residents who have norovirus illness. **This virus is very contagious and can spread rapidly** throughout such environments.

### When do symptoms begin?

Symptoms of norovirus illness usually begin about 24 to 48 hours after ingestion of the virus, but they can appear as early as 12 hours after exposure.

### Are noroviruses contagious?

Noroviruses are **very contagious and can spread easily** from person to person. Both stool and vomit carry the virus. Particular care should be taken with young children in diapers who may have diarrhea.

### **How long are people contagious?**

People infected with norovirus are contagious from the moment they begin feeling ill to at least 3 days after recovery. Some people may be contagious for as long as 2 weeks after recovery. Therefore, it is very important to use good handwashing and other hygienic practices.

### **Who gets norovirus infection?**

Anyone can become infected with these viruses. There are many different strains of norovirus, which makes it difficult for a person's body to develop long-lasting immunity, so norovirus illness can recur throughout a person's lifetime. In addition, because of differences in genetic factors, some people are more likely to become infected and develop more severe illness than others.

### **What treatment is available for people with norovirus infection?**

Currently, there is no antiviral medication that works against norovirus and there is no vaccine to prevent infection. Norovirus infection **cannot** be treated with antibiotics. This is because antibiotics work to fight bacteria and not viruses.

### **What should I do if I have norovirus infection?**

Norovirus illness is usually brief in healthy individuals. When people are ill with vomiting and diarrhea, they should drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Dehydration among young children, the elderly, the sick, can be common, and it is the most serious health effect that can result from norovirus infection. By drinking oral rehydration fluids (ORF), juice, or water, people can reduce their chance of becoming dehydrated. Sports drinks do not replace the nutrients and minerals lost during this illness.

### **Reporting illness:**

If any you or anyone you know experiences illness consistent with norovirus symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, and/or stomach cramping, please report the incident immediately to the Yellowstone City-County Health Department at 406-651-6407.

### **Can norovirus infections be prevented?**

Yes. You can decrease your chance of coming in contact with noroviruses by following these preventive steps:

- Frequently wash your hands, especially after toilet visits and changing diapers and before eating or preparing food.
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables, and steam oysters before eating them.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces immediately after an episode of illness by using a solution of 1/3 cup bleach per 1 gallon of water (50:1 dilution) always following manufacturer safety precautions
- Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with virus after an episode of illness (use hot water and soap).
- Flush or discard any vomit and/or stool in the toilet and make sure that the surrounding area is kept clean.

**Persons who are infected with norovirus should not prepare food while they have symptoms and for 3 days after they recover from their illness.** Food that may have been contaminated by an ill person should be disposed of properly.

### **If I was ill with norovirus, how soon can I return to work/school/daycare?**

Do not go to work if you are ill with diarrhea or vomiting. You may return to work/school/daycare after you have been free of symptoms for 48 hours, unless you are a food worker. Food workers may return to work after 72 hours or 3 days of being symptom-free.

**For more information, call the Lake County Health Department  
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