



Norovirus

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus is the most common cause of epidemic acute gastroenteritis. The main symptom is violent vomiting but nausea, abdominal cramp and diarrhoea also frequently occur. It is also sometimes known as “stomach flu” or “winter vomiting bug”.

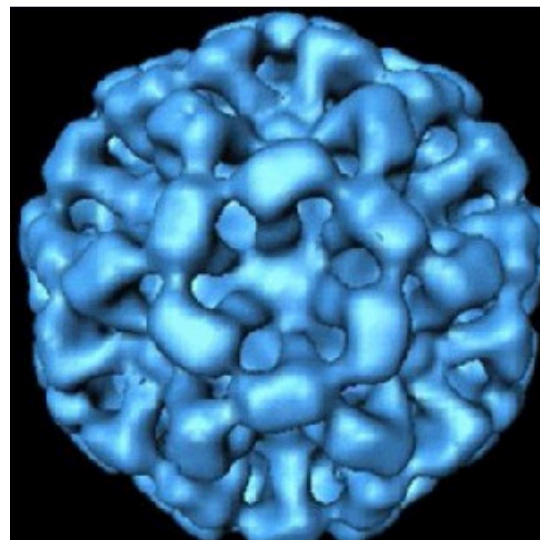
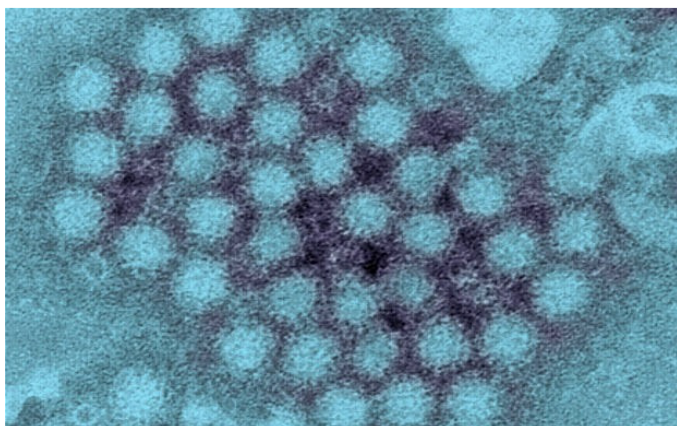
The incubation period is usually 24 – 72 hours and it usually lasts 12 – 72 hours.

The bad news is that this is one of the most infectious organisms known (one scientist has described it as “the most infectious agent ever described”) and it rapidly spreads, particularly where there are lots of people in a restricted area such as a hospital, care home or cruise liner.

Some of the reasons it is so infectious include:

- It rapidly evolves so there is little protective immunity
- It survives a long time in the environment (up to two months)
- It is stable on human hands for over two hours
- It is resistant to disinfection
- People who are infected excrete large amounts of virus and for quite a long time (up to 35 days)
- 20 – 30% of infected cases show no symptoms so they will pass it on to others without being aware they have it.

The peak Norovirus season usually runs from Christmas through January and February but in early December 2012 the Health Protection Agency were reporting that the season had started early with already over half a million people infected and infection levels 64% higher than the same period the previous year.



Is it “Food Poisoning”?

The symptoms of Norovirus are identical to food poisoning but Norovirus can be caught in a number of ways – through food, from the environment or person-to-person.

Some foods (particularly raw shellfish such as oysters) may contain Norovirus due to contamination from sewage during growth or harvesting, but in theory any food could be contaminated by an infected food handler.

It is essential, therefore, that any food handler showing symptoms should not be working anywhere in the food environment.

Hand Washing

Bearing in mind the facts listed above, you will see that exclusion of food handlers while they are ill is only going to go part of the way to preventing spread of the virus. As many infected people show no symptoms, and excretion of the virus can continue for up to 35 days, thorough handwashing is essential at all times.

Many food handlers think they are being extra hygienic by using alcohol-based hand gel but experiments have shown that alcohol-based sanitisers are less effective at removing Norovirus from hands than ordinary soap and water. If alcohol-based sanitisers are used they should never replace normal handwashing but be used as an extra precaution after thorough handwashing with soap and water.

Vomit

However good the hand-washing regime is, Norovirus can easily be picked up by inhaling airborne droplets from vomit. Any vomit must be cleared up immediately and the whole area disinfected.



What to do when somebody vomits

When somebody vomits your concern is usually with the person concerned but, if food is being prepared nearby, you need to swing into action straight away to prevent a major disaster.

Particles from a number of highly infectious viruses are usually present in vomit and these easily become airborne in the form of aerosols and can then settle on surfaces and food. They are persistent and can stay infectious for a long period. From these sources of contamination many other people can be made ill unless you act fast.

1. Deal with the situation immediately.
2. Stop all food handling in the area.
3. Carefully dispose of all potentially contaminated food.
4. Consider disposal of any food handled by the ill person that day or the day before.
5. Put on disposable gloves, disposable mask and disposable apron.
6. Use absorbent material such as paper towels to limit the spread of liquid soiling. Dispose of this carefully.
7. Thoroughly clean the area – all surfaces within range of aerosol fall-out.
8. Make up some fresh hypochlorite solution (e.g. from tablets) with at least 1000 ppm free chlorine.
9. Thoroughly disinfect all surfaces and equipment with this solution, leaving it in place for at least 5 minutes.
10. Rinse off as this solution is corrosive.
11. In both cleaning, disinfecting or rinsing, ensure that food is not contaminated by splashes of wash-water.
12. Food preparation should only recommence after complete cleaning and disinfection has taken place.



Although most disinfectants are good at killing bacteria they are usually poor at killing enteric viruses. If you don't use the hypochlorite tablets as described, you must ensure that your disinfectant will kill viruses and that it will achieve at least a 3-log reduction of enteric viruses in 5 minutes. Anything less than this will not be effective.

Be prepared

When potential contamination of food, equipment or surfaces from viruses has occurred you must act fast. You therefore need to be prepared for this possibility.

- Keep a stock of the necessary materials readily available – hypochlorite tablets and disposable gloves, facemasks, aprons, paper towels, plastic bags/bin liners.
- Ensure that staff are properly trained to deal with the situation without spreading contamination or making themselves ill. It might be a good idea to organise a dummy run.



For further advice on Norovirus contact Colchester Borough Council's Food and Safety Team on 01206 282581 or email food.safety@colchester.gov.uk