Noroviruses

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause the “stomach flu,” or gastroenteritis in people. The term norovirus was recently approved as the official name for this group of viruses. Several other names have been used for noroviruses, including:

- Norwalk-like viruses (NLV's)
- Caliciviruses (because they belong to the virus family *Caliciviridae*)
- Small round structured viruses.

Viruses are very different from bacteria and parasites. Some of these can cause illnesses similar to norovirus infection. Viruses are much smaller, are not affected by treatment with antibiotics, and cannot grow outside of a person's body.

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 their illness. Sometimes people are unable to drink enough liquids to replace the liquids they lost because of vomiting and diarrhea. These persons can become dehydrated and may need special medical attention. This problem with dehydration is 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.

Noroviruses spread easily from person to person. Both stool and vomit are infectious. Particular care should be taken with young children in diapers who may have diarrhea. 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 particularly important for people to use good hand washing and other hygienic practices after they have recently recovered from norovirus illness.

Anyone can become infected with these viruses. There are many different strains of norovirus, so it is difficult to develop long-lasting immunity.

SYMPTOMS

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. The symptoms of norovirus illness usually include: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and some stomach cramping. Sometimes people additionally 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 adults. Most people with norovirus illness have both of these symptoms.

NAMES OF NOROVIRUS INFECTIONS

Illness caused by norovirus infection has several names, including:

- Stomach flu: This “stomach flu” is ***not*** related to the flu (or influenza), which is a respiratory illness caused by influenza virus.
- Viral gastroenteritis: The most common name for illness caused by norovirus. Gastroenteritis refers to an inflammation of the stomach and intestines.
- Acute gastroenteritis.
- Non-bacterial gastroenteritis.
- Food poisoning (although there are other causes of food poisoning).
- Alicivirus infection.

CAUSE

- 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 a 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 contagious and can spread rapidly.

TREATMENT

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

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

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

➢ Frequently wash your hands, especially after toilet visits, 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 bleach-based household cleaner.
➢ Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with virus.
➢ After an episode of illness, wash with hot water and soap.
➢ Flush or discard any vomitus and/or stool in the toilet. 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.

Information courtesy of the CDC.

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