

OUTBREAKS OF GASTROENTERITIS

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis is an illness caused by a virus called Norovirus. In the past, noroviruses have also been called 'winter vomiting viruses', 'small round structured viruses' or 'Norwalk-like viruses'.

How does norovirus spread?

The virus is easily spread from one person to another. Noroviruses are often introduced into a premises by an infected person. They can then be transmitted by contact with the infected person; by consuming contaminated food or water, or by contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. Infected persons can then spread the virus to other people and to other premises. If Norovirus is allowed to dry on surfaces it can survive for several days. The infectious dose is very low, swallowing only a few virus particles may be enough to cause illness.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Symptoms often start with the sudden onset of nausea followed by projectile vomiting and watery diarrhoea. Not everybody who is infected will experience all of the symptoms. Some people may also have a raised temperature, headaches and aching limbs, others may be infected but not show any signs of illness at all. They can still spread the virus to other people.

Symptoms usually begin around 12 to 48 hours after becoming infected. The illness is self-limiting with the symptoms lasting for between 12 to 60 hours. Most people make a full recovery within 1 or 2 days, however some people, such as the very young or elderly, may become dehydrated and require hospital treatment.

Why does Norovirus often cause outbreaks?

Norovirus often causes outbreaks because it is easily spread from one person to another and is able to survive in the environment for many days. There are many different strains of Norovirus, immunity is short-lived and infection with one strain does not prevent infection by another strain. Outbreaks commonly occur in establishments such as hospitals, nursing homes, schools and on cruise ships, where people are in close contact with one another for long periods of time.

The illness can affect many people at the same time and may resemble a food poisoning incident. It is important to act promptly to avoid person-to-person spread. There may be numerous customer complaints and media interest.

How can these outbreaks be stopped?

Outbreaks can be difficult to control. The most effective way to respond to an outbreak is to establish good hygiene measures. Strict hand-washing is required, especially when handling food, after contact with infected people, and after using the toilet. Contaminated areas need disinfecting promptly. Infected people should be isolated. Anyone with illness should not prepare food until 48 hours after their symptoms have stopped.

How is Norovirus treated?

There is no specific treatment for Norovirus infection apart from letting the illness run its course. It is important to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. There are no long-term effects from norovirus.

Who is at risk of getting Norovirus?

Norovirus can affect people of all ages. The very young and elderly should take extra care if infected, as dehydration is more common in these age groups.

Outbreaks of Norovirus are often reported where large numbers of people congregate. This provides an ideal environment for the spread of the virus.

How common is Norovirus?

It is estimated that Norovirus affects between 600,000 and a million people in the UK each year.

Who should I report an outbreak to and what will happen?

When the number of people ill exceeds the norm you should notify Blackpool Council. Contact the Food Control team on **01253 478332**. During out of office hours, weekends or Bank Holidays ring the Council's emergency service line on **01253 477600**, let them know it's urgent.

A report of an outbreak will receive a prompt reply. Public Protection Officers will visit and obtain information on who has been ill, deliver sample kits and advise on additional hygiene measures. The Public Protection Officer will notify the Health Protection Agency. Faecal samples will be requested from symptomatic cases and taken to the laboratory for microbiological analysis. The situation will then be monitored on a daily basis.

What practical advice can be offered?

- Food handlers reporting illness must be immediately sent off duty and not be allowed to return to work until 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.
- Any food prepared by an ill person should be disposed of.
- Areas where people have been sick should be isolated, cleaned and disinfected as quickly as possible. Ensure the area is well ventilated and windows kept open. Everything within a 3-metre radius of the affected area should be cleaned.
- If someone is sick in a kitchen or dining room the potential for the illness to spread increases. All food in the contaminated area must be disposed of and the surrounding area must be thoroughly cleaned.
- A dustpan can be used to scoop up any vomit, which can then be flushed down the toilet. The area and the dustpan should then be thoroughly washed with hot soapy water, and then rewashed using a diluted bleach solution.
- Make sure food handlers do not clean up any sickness. Sinks within food preparation areas should not be used.
- Ensure all toilets have hot and cold running water, soap and towels. Providing disposable towels may help reduce the risk of infection.
- Cleaners should consider wearing disposable gloves, aprons and masks when cleaning affected areas. They should wash their hands immediately afterwards.
- Make sure the disinfectant used is effective against viruses. Use a viricidal sanitiser or diluted bleach solution.
- If you use an outside laundry company advise them of the outbreak so that they do not put themselves at risk. Soiled laundry should be washed separately on a hot cycle.
- Carpets and soft furnishings in the affected area should ideally be steam cleaned. Virus particles can last up to 12 days on soft furnishings. Do not vacuum surfaces as it may make the virus airborne.
- Public toilets and hand contact surfaces such as flush levers, taps, handrails, door handles and switches, should be cleaned more frequently.
- Ensure staff are trained to report instances of vomiting and diarrhoea that they come across so that you are aware of suspected cases at the earliest opportunity.

- Affected people should avoid public areas and be encouraged to remain in their rooms. Take food and drink up to the bedrooms.
- Sample pots will be provided for you to give to affected staff and guests. Samples are required in order to establish the cause of illness. No more than 6 samples are required.
- Consider informing new guests who have not yet arrived of the incident. They can then make an informed choice as to whether or not they still want to come.
- Encourage staff to wash their hands regularly, particularly after visiting the toilet. Reiterate to guests the importance of good hand washing in reducing the spread of infection. Extra signage in the toilets is a good idea.
- Discourage visitors to the premises.
- Do not send affected persons to hospital or to a GP unless absolutely necessary; even then you should warn the hospital or ambulance that they have had vomiting and diarrhoea.
- Try and determine how many people are affected, the date of the first case, and what the symptoms were. The outbreak should be monitored on a day-by-day basis. Try and get samples from affected people and keep a log of new cases.