

Viral Gastro-enteritis

What is Viral Gastro-enteritis?

Viral gastro-enteritis is the term used to describe gastroenteric illness as a result of infection by a virus. In recent years the illness has become more common, often making the news, particularly in the months from October to April and is sometimes called 'Winter Vomiting Disease'. The illness is caused by a number of different viruses including Rotaviruses, or more commonly, Norwalk-like viruses.

How is Viral Gastro-enteritis spread?

Norwalk-like viruses may be caught from a variety of sources including shellfish, salads that have been irrigated or washed in contaminated water, and more commonly, by person-to-person transmission from infected individuals who excrete virus particles, through vomitus or diarrhoea. The illness may also be contracted from everyday objects and environments that have been contaminated by the virus.

Who can it affect?

The infection can affect anyone, but the very young, the elderly and immunocompromised are particularly vulnerable. It is believed that only a few viruses are required to cause illness. The virus is known to cause outbreaks of illness in schools, hospitals, and residential homes; and also in environments where large numbers of people are in close proximity, such as cruise ships and even army camps.

What are the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis?

Symptoms of the illness can take from between 12 to 48 hours to appear and typically include:

- Feeling hot and cold
- Headaches and nausea
- Abdominal pains
- Diarrhoea
- Projectile, uncontrollable vomiting – during which large amounts of the virus can be expelled into the immediate environment. The virus particles are then ingested by other people in the immediate vicinity resulting in an outbreak of further cases.

In some instances symptoms can be very rapid and severe, the illness is, however, self-limiting and there is no specific treatment apart from drinking lots of water to prevent dehydration. Most people make a full recovery within 2 to 4 days.

Diagnosis

The symptoms of viral gastro-enteritis are similar to that of a 'food poisoning'-like infection. In order to identify and confirm the name of the bug that is causing illness you may be asked to provide a faecal specimen for laboratory analysis. The sample will be tested for the presence of a range of gastro-enteric infections, including food poisoning bugs. If the test results for your sample are all 'negative' it indicates no food poisoning bugs have been isolated and that your illness is more likely to have been caused by a virus. Further laboratory tests may confirm this although they are not always automatically undertaken.

Do you need to stay off work of school?

People who work with food and in health care occupations, such as nurses and care assistants, should remain off work for at least 48 hours after the symptoms have fully cleared-up. Children under 5 years should also be kept off playgroup or nursery until they have been free of symptoms for at least 48 hours.

Control and prevention of further cases

In order to control and prevent the spread of infection in the household and wider community sufferers of viral gastro-enteritis are asked to observe the following precautionary measures:

- Try to isolate or segregate symptomatic cases from other members of household.
- Maintain good personal hygiene – always wash hands with warm water and soap after using the toilet and particularly before handling food.
- Furniture, surfaces and environments that have been contaminated with aerosolised vomit should be cleaned with disinfectant solutions or approved sanitizers. A steam cleaner may be required to decontaminate carpets, curtains and other soft furnishings.
- Open windows of contaminated rooms to facilitate airflow and a change of atmosphere.
- Refrain from working with food or nursing, and attending playgroups or nurseries until at least 48 hours after symptoms have ceased.