

November 2003

Norwalk Virus

What is Norwalk virus infection?

Norwalk virus is a common cause of vomiting and diarrheal illness each winter and has often been referred to as 'stomach flu' or 'Winter Vomiting Disease'. Norwalk virus infections have been linked to outbreaks of vomiting and/or diarrhea in institutions such as child-care centres and long term care facilities as well as on cruise ships, camps, schools and households.

How do people get Norwalk virus infection?

The Norwalk virus is found in the stool and sometimes in the vomit of ill persons. The Norwalk virus is spread very easily from person to person by coming into contact with the fecally contaminated hands of an ill person or by contact with fecally-contaminated objects (e.g. door knobs, stair railings, etc.) and then touching your mouth. Airborne transmission has been suggested to explain the rapid spread in institutional settings. Proper hand-washing is the best way to prevent the spread of Norwalk virus infection.

What are the signs and symptoms of Norwalk virus infection?

Most individuals with Norwalk virus infection will experience 1 to 3 days of nausea, vomiting and watery diarrhea. Other symptoms may include fever and stomach cramps. Severe illness or hospitalization caused by Norwalk virus infection is uncommon. Infected individuals usually recover in 2 to 3 days without serious or long-term health effects. If diarrhea is bloody and/or accompanied with a high fever or if the symptoms last longer than 72 hours, seek medical attention or call TeleHealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000 for advice.

How soon after exposure do symptoms of Norwalk virus infection appear?

Symptoms usually appear in 1 to 2 days after exposure to the virus.

How is Norwalk virus infection diagnosed?

A stool sample is required to test for and diagnose Norwalk virus infection. However, this is not recommended or necessary if the symptoms resolve in 2-3 days.

What is the treatment for Norwalk virus infection?

There is no specific treatment for Norwalk virus infection. Persons should get bed rest and drink plenty of fluids. Persons who become severely dehydrated should seek medical attention.

Who is at risk for Norwalk virus infection?

Everyone! The virus does not discriminate. The symptoms of Norwalk virus infection may be more severe for older individuals, young children and those with underlying medical conditions who may become dehydrated due to the vomiting and diarrhea.

How can the spread of Norwalk virus be prevented?

- Wash hands thoroughly for at least 15 seconds with soap and warm water after using the toilet and before preparing or eating food;
- Do not prepare food for others if you have symptoms of a Norwalk virus infection;
- Get plenty of rest and stay home until you are no longer infectious to others, which is a minimum of 48 hours after symptoms have resolved (especially vomiting and diarrhea).

Is there a Vaccine For Norwalk Virus?

No. There currently is no vaccine available in Canada to prevent Norwalk virus infections.

Is Norwalk Virus Infection “the flu”?

People often refer to the symptoms of Norwalk virus infection as the “stomach flu”. However, influenza (the flu) is a much more serious respiratory illness with symptoms of abrupt onset of cough and fever. While receiving the annual influenza vaccine is important each winter and is free for all Ontario residents, the influenza vaccine will not protect you against a Norwalk virus infection.

What should you do if you think that you or a family member has been infected with Norwalk virus infection?

- Do not attend school or daycare until you are no longer infectious to others, which is a minimum of 48 hours after symptoms have resolved (especially vomiting and diarrhea);
- Do not visit hospitals or long term care facilities until you are no longer infectious to others;
- Drink lots of fluids;
- Seek medical attention if symptoms persist;
- Frequently disinfect high traffic areas (e.g. taps, bathrooms, doorknobs, surfaces, etc.) with 1:10 diluted bleach and water solution;