



Royal Cornwall Hospitals  
NHS Trust

# Norovirus

(Winter vomiting virus)

Information for patients and visitors



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## **What is norovirus?**

This is a virus that causes individual cases and outbreaks (groups of cases) of vomiting and diarrhoea. Although norovirus does not start in hospitals, if brought in from the community it can spread quickly causing major disruption in hospital activity - meaning wards have to be closed to stop it spreading further.

Norovirus is sometimes referred to as the winter vomiting virus because of its increased prevalence during the winter months - however it can occur at any time of the year.

## **How is it spread?**

The virus is extremely infectious and spread in a number of ways:

- directly from an infected person
- from contact with surfaces or objects that are contaminated
- by eating food that has been prepared and contaminated by someone with the illness
- by eating under-cooked shellfish from polluted waters (for example, oysters or prawns)
- from contaminated water supplies.

## **Who is at risk?**

Norovirus can affect individuals of all ages, there are no particular groups of people at higher risk of catching the virus. However, individuals who are particularly vulnerable (i.e., babies or the elderly) should take extra care if infected as dehydration is more common in these age groups.

## **Why does norovirus close hospitals?**

Although norovirus does not start in hospitals, if brought in from the community it can spread quickly causing major disruption in hospital activity - meaning wards have to be closed to stop it spreading further.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal cramps. Individuals often feel generally unwell, tired and are not hungry.

Some people may also have a raised temperature, headache and aching limbs. The average duration of the virus is between 12 and 60 hours.

## **How long is the incubation period?**

The time taken from catching the virus to becoming unwell is usually between 24 and 48 hours.

## **Can norovirus be treated?**

No, there is no specific treatment other than letting the illness run its course.

Efforts should be made to avoid getting dehydrated.

## **How can I avoid being infected?**

Good hygiene measures (such as frequent hand washing with soap and water) are important, especially around someone who is infected.

## **What if I become infected?**

### **Do:**

- maintain a high standard of personal hygiene (particularly when washing hands).

### **Avoid:**

- close contact with individuals who are particularly vulnerable (for example, babies or elderly people)
- preparing food for other people (if possible)
- taking anti-diarrhoeal medication (this is not recommended)
- visiting individuals in residential / care homes.

## **When can I return to work/school?**

After being symptom-free for 48 hours.

## **What if a patient in hospital has norovirus?**

- In hospital, patients who have norovirus may be nursed in a single room.
- If there are several patients with norovirus they may be nursed together in the same bay (cohorted).
- Patients who have norovirus or are on a ward which has been closed with norovirus are asked to remain on the ward and not to visit other parts of the hospital.
- Visiting will be restricted, unless there are exceptional circumstances (this should be discussed with the Ward Manager or a nominated Deputy).

## **What if a patient in hospital has norovirus? (contd)**

- Patients who are vomiting or who have diarrhoea should not be discharged to other hospitals.
- Once patients are symptom free for 72 hours and have had a formed stool, they can be moved back into a bay (if they have been nursed in a single room).
- Whilst in hospital any further advice can be obtained from the Infection Prevention and Control Team.
- Once discharged, further advice may be obtained from your GP.
- Treatment usually involves ensuring the patient does not become dehydrated. Symptoms usually pass within 72 hours.

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