

Infection Prevention and You



Norovirus—a.k.a. the vomiting bug

Cruises are great vacations, offering millions of people exciting travel adventures. However, they can have a bad reputation with reports of illness outbreaks on them. Generally when you hear those reports, you're hearing about norovirus, also known as the vomiting bug.

What is norovirus?

Norovirus is a serious gastrointestinal illness that causes inflammation of the stomach and/or intestines. This inflammation then leads to nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. Norovirus is extremely contagious (easy to spread) and will ruin your fun.

Norovirus is the leading cause of illness and outbreaks related to food in the United States. It generally happens when food service workers who have the virus touch food without washing their hands well or at all. It can also spread by sharing food or utensils with someone who has norovirus. You can get norovirus if you touch a surface that was touched by a person with norovirus and then touch your mouth.

How does norovirus spread?

Norovirus can spread from person-to-person, from contaminated surfaces, and from contaminated food or water. It causes approximately 20 million illnesses each year. Symptoms start between 12 to 48 hours after being exposed and can last anywhere from one to three days. Dehydration is a big concern for people with norovirus, especially in the elderly and the very young, and a main reason for people being hospitalized. People are most contagious when they are actively sick and for the first few days after getting over the illness.

Why is norovirus so contagious?

It can be in your feces (poop) before you start feeling sick, and it can stay for two weeks or longer after you're feeling better. Combine that with people not doing a great job of washing their hands and you have big potential for spreading this virus. Norovirus can spread quickly in closed places such as daycares, nursing homes, schools, and yes, cruise ships. There is no treatment specifically for norovirus. The best thing to do if you think you've got norovirus is to contact your doctor, treat the symptoms, stay hydrated, and stay home.

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How can you protect yourself from norovirus?

Wash your hands frequently, avoid sharing food and utensils with someone who is ill, and keep yourself healthy! Wash your hands before you start preparing food. Wash fruits and vegetables well. Cook food thoroughly. Wash your linens after you've been sick and if they get contaminated with vomit or feces. Clean surfaces—especially those in the bathroom—with a chlorine bleach solution (5–25 tablespoons of household bleach [5.25%] per gallon of water). If you don't have access to a sink, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer to clean your hands.

So the next time you're on a cruise ship (or in a daycare, school, nursing home, etc.) and you see hand sanitizer or hand washing stations, use them! They are there to help you protect yourself from norovirus and lots of other icky germs.

Additional resources

APIC consumer alert—Norovirus <http://apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=norovirus-how-you-can-stay-safe>

APIC—Clean your hands often <http://consumers.site.apic.org/infection-prevention-basics/wash-your-hands-often/>

CDC—Have You Ever Heard of Norovirus? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ey_OV_-pBeo

CDC—Norovirus <http://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/about/index.html>

CDC—Norovirus: Food Handlers <http://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/food-handlers/work-with-food.html>

CDC—Handwashing: Clean hands Save Lives <http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/>

CDC—Tips for Healthy Cruising <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp/pub/CruisingTips/healthycruising.htm>

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