

Norovirus Fact Sheet

What is norovirus?

Norovirus is a virus that causes illness sometimes referred to as the “stomach flu,” although it is not related to the flu (or influenza). Infection with norovirus affects the stomach and intestines, causing an illness called gastroenteritis. Norovirus was named for Norwalk, Ohio in 1968 after an outbreak in a school. More than half of all foodborne illness outbreaks are caused by norovirus.

What are the symptoms of norovirus?

Norovirus symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramps. Some people also complain of headache, fever or chills, and muscle aches. Symptoms usually begin 1-2 days after contact with the virus and usually last for 1-3 days. During that time, people can feel very ill and often vomit violently or have explosive diarrhea many times a day.

How is norovirus spread?

Norovirus is found in the stool or vomit of infected people. Ill people are contagious for up to three days after their symptoms resolve. The virus is very contagious and easily spread by:

- Eating food or drinking liquids contaminated with norovirus.
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus, and then placing a hand to the mouth. For example, a child picks up tongs on a salad bar previously handled by a child with norovirus, takes some carrots, and then eats the carrots with hands. In another example, a school nutrition worker handles a door knob infected with norovirus and then serves food.
- Having direct contact with stool or vomit from a person who is infected.
- Having contact with tiny droplets of vomit that becomes airborne during a vomiting incident or from splashing. Droplets can travel through the air up to 25 feet to land on food and food contact surfaces.

Why is norovirus important for school nutrition employees?

People working with food who are sick with norovirus can easily make others ill. A sick school nutrition employee can – without meaning to – contaminate the food he or she is handling. Many of those eating the contaminated food may become ill, resulting in an outbreak. People infected with norovirus are contagious from the moment they begin feeling ill to at least 3 days after symptoms are gone. Some people may be contagious for as long as 2 weeks after recovery. It is important for people to use good handwashing and other hygienic practices, especially after they have recently recovered from norovirus illness.



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How can norovirus be prevented?

Everyone plays a part in the prevention of norovirus by practicing good personal hygiene, which includes:

- Frequent handwashing with soap and water, especially after each toilet visit, before eating or preparing food, before putting on clean gloves, and after changing diapers in child care settings.
- Preventing bare hand contact with all ready-to-eat and ready-to-serve foods.
- Reporting illness symptoms to your manager.
- This includes symptoms of vomiting, diarrhea, jaundice or yellowing of the skin or eyes, a sore throat with fever, and infected cuts on hands, wrists, or exposed arms.
- You should also tell your manager if you have been diagnosed with or in contact with others having foodborne illnesses, which in addition to norovirus includes Hepatitis A, Shigella, E. coli, and Salmonella Typhi.
- Staying home when you are ill. For illnesses like norovirus, your manager will ask that you stay home until your symptoms have been resolved for two days.



Norovirus is the leading cause of foodborne disease in the United States and has been the primary source of outbreaks in schools. Follow prevention steps to reduce the likelihood of an outbreak in your school.

This fact sheet is part of a series of three fact sheets on norovirus control and prevention.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service through an agreement with the National Food Service Management Institute at The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.

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Suggested Reference Citation: National Food Service Management Institute. (2013). *Norovirus fact sheet*. University, MS: Author.

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