

"Winter vomiting" caused by Norovirus – Advice for patients and relatives

If, during the months of December to February, you suffer a sudden attack of vomiting, which may be accompanied by watery diarrhoea and crampy tummy pains, it is likely that you have developed "winter vomiting" caused by a virus called Norovirus.

Here is some practical information to help you if you think you may be suffering from Norovirus infection or are the relative or carer of someone who may be.

1. First of all, don't panic. Sudden vomiting can be distressing but it is very unlikely that you will come to any serious harm. The illness lasts for about 2 days and settles down by itself. It is unlikely that you will need admission to hospital. So, if you feel queasy... take it easy!
2. If you are elderly or frail, you may suffer a more severe bout of illness. The main concern is that you could become dehydrated because of the fluid losses caused by vomiting and diarrhoea, particularly if you are unable to compensate by taking plenty of fluids by mouth.
3. Wherever possible, it is advisable for elderly or frail individuals to be looked after by a family member or other carer during the brief period of the illness.
4. If you are concerned that you, or the person you are caring for, is becoming dehydrated or is suffering from worryingly severe vomiting or diarrhoea, then call your GP or out-of-hours GP deputising service for advice.
5. The GP may prescribe oral medication to treat the vomiting or diarrhoea, as well as giving you oral re-hydration drinks.
6. You should minimise your contact with other people until you have been symptom free for at least 48 hrs. This advice is particularly important if you are a food handler, child or work/ mix with vulnerable people eg the elderly.
7. Wherever possible, you should avoid going to hospitals or other care facilities unless absolutely necessary. Anyone with vomiting or diarrhoea should avoid going to hospital or other care facilities to visit relatives or friends. This is to prevent the spread of the virus.
8. Spread of infection is by contamination of hands, food, equipment and surfaces with infectious particles from vomiting or diarrhoea. Wherever possible, keep well away from others during bouts of vomiting or diarrhoea, and ensure that your hands and contaminated items are cleaned immediately (or disposed of, where appropriate).

9. Advice for cleaning and disinfecting is as follows:
- a. Wear gloves (e.g. "Marigolds") for handling items such as clothes, bed linen and towels that have become contaminated with vomit or diarrhoea, and when cleaning up equipment or surfaces that have become contaminated.
 - b. When carrying or cleaning contaminated items, keep them at arms' length in order to avoid splashes to the face and contamination of your own clothing.
 - c. Domestic dishwashers and washing machines (on as hot a programme as allowable for the item) provide the safest and most efficient way of cleaning crockery/cutlery and clothing/bedding/towels in the home, rather than washing by hand.
 - d. If environmental surfaces, e.g. carpets, furniture, work surfaces, sanitary ware, become contaminated with vomit or diarrhoea first cover the affected area in layers of kitchen towel then, wearing gloves, carefully scoop the kitchen towel at arms' length and place directly into a clean plastic bag for disposal.
 - e. For contaminated kitchen and bathroom surfaces, after soaking up a spillage wash the surface with hot soapy water and then consider disinfecting with a ready-made disinfectant (e.g. bleach-containing) spray.
 - f. For contaminated soft surfaces, e.g. carpets, rugs and furnishings, after soaking up a spillage consider using a stain-removing spray and/or steam vacuum cleaning.
 - g. After removing gloves, clean them thoroughly in hot soapy water and then clean your hands in a fresh supply of hot soapy water.

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