

Beware of Winter Vomiting Sickness

In 1929, pediatrician Dr. John Zahorsky described sporadic cases of vomiting and diarrhea among his patients during the months of November through May which he called Winter Vomiting Sickness. It was not until an outbreak of the contagious illness in a Norwalk, Ohio elementary school in 1968 that the virus causing it was first identified. Then called the Norwalk agent or Norwalk virus, it is now known as Norovirus.

Norovirus is one of the most infectious organisms ever identified. It can cause debilitating nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain and can quickly spread through schools, cruise ships, and nursing homes. Norovirus infection can result in high absenteeism at work and school and frequently requires schools to close. Often called *Stomach Flu*, the infection is not related to influenza and cannot be prevented by the annual flu shot.

Nor is there a cure for norovirus. While medications often help with the nausea, fever, and body aches, the infection must simply run its course which usually takes 2-3 days. Symptoms typically start 24 to 48 hours after infection which most of the time is through direct contact with an infected person or by touching a contaminated surface. It is the cause of about half of all food-borne illnesses, often through contamination by sick food workers. Not only does norovirus move swiftly, it is very hardy. The virus has been detected on dry surfaces after 3 to 4 weeks and has been shown in the laboratory to be able to cause infection after being in water for two months.

The best defense against Norovirus is frequent hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds each time. Avoid touching your mouth. While alcohol-based hand sanitizers work well for many infections, when used alone without hand washing, they are largely ineffective against norovirus. Hand sanitizers can reduce the number of norovirus particles on the skin, but not eradicate them. Scientists have shown that it only takes 10-20 norovirus particles, a tiny amount, to

cause an infection. When caring for ill individuals, use bleach-based cleaners to disinfect surfaces and object that are frequently touched. Soiled clothes and linens should be immediately laundered.

The best way to prevent the spread of Norovirus to others is to stay home when you are sick. People are generally most contagious when they are ill and for the first few days after they feel better. Do not return to work or school for at least 1 to 2 days after the symptoms are gone. While most people with norovirus infections feel miserable, serious complications are rare. Young children and the elderly are at the greatest risk, often from dehydration. Consult with your physician or health care provider if you believe your symptoms might require a trip to the Emergency Room or Urgent Care.

Unfortunately, there are at least 25 different groups and hundreds of strains of norovirus which makes it difficult for the body to develop immunity against the illness. If you have had a norovirus infection once, you can get it again.

For more information about norovirus, contact the Adams County Health Department at 937-544-5547.

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