Gastroenteritis caused by Norovirus and other viruses

Gastroenteritis can be caused by a number of different viruses (stomach bugs). Norovirus, better known as the winter vomiting bug or Norwalk virus is the most commonly found of these. It is also caused by other Small Round Structured Viruses (SRSV). Rotavirus commonly causes gastroenteritis in children.

Norovirus
If you have ever been ill at home with diarrhoea and vomiting lasting one to two days, this is likely to have been caused by Norovirus. It is estimated that Norovirus affects between 600,000 and a million people in the UK each year. It is most common in the winter months but can occur at any time.

At risk groups
Viral Gastroenteritis can affect people of all ages and can cause outbreaks when people are confined in close proximity to each other in settings such as schools, hospitals, cruise ships, military bases and similar settings.

The very young and elderly should take extra care if infected, as dehydration is more common in these age groups.

Spread of infection
Viral Gastroenteritis is easily transmitted from one person to another:
• by contact with an infected person
• by consuming food or water contaminated with viral particles
• by contact with surfaces or objects contaminated with viral particles
• by swallowing the virus in the air after someone has had projectile vomiting
• also, rarely from raw or undercooked food, particularly shell fish, as this may be contaminated with raw sewage

Symptoms of gastroenteritis
The following symptoms will usually begin around 12 to 48 hours after becoming infected with Gastroenteritis/Norovirus:
• sudden onset of nausea and/or vomiting, which may be projectile
• diarrhoea, which is often watery
• stomach pains and cramps
• some people may have a raised temperature, headaches and aching limbs

The symptoms will usually last for 12 to 60 hours. Most people make a full recovery within one to two days. Some people (usually the very young or elderly) may become very dehydrated and require hospital treatment however.

If you are unwell at home and you have symptoms that last longer than a few days, or you already have a serious illness or are unsure of the cause of symptoms, contact your GP.

Outbreaks of gastroenteritis
Healthcare settings tend to be particularly affected as viruses such as Norovirus and Rotovirus are easily introduced by infected patients, staff or visitors. These viruses can survive in the environment for many days. Outbreaks tend to affect more than 50% of people who are
exposed and can be difficult to control. Patients affected in hospital are usually isolated for up to 72 hours after their symptoms have ceased. Affected wards may be closed to admissions, visiting restricted and strict hygiene measures implemented.

**Treatment – what to do if you have symptoms**

There is no specific treatment, apart from letting the illness run its course.

- It is important to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration.
- If you are not a hospital patient and you have the typical symptoms of gastroenteritis it is best to stay at home until symptoms clear.

**Prevention**

Good hygiene can prevent the spread of infection. Rigorous cleaning is the most effective way of removing contamination from the environment. We endeavour to clean wards and equipment to the highest standards.

- Soap and water is much more effective against these viruses than alcohol gel.
- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet and before handling or eating food. If you are visiting a patient suffering from gastroenteritis you should wash your hands with soap and water before leaving the patients room.
- If you are in hospital report any diarrhoea or vomiting to staff immediately.

**If you have gastroenteritis**

Avoid spreading the infection to others:

- Avoid direct contact with other people and preparing food for others, until at least 48 hours after your symptoms have gone. You may still be contagious, even though you no longer have sickness or diarrhoea.
- You may be asked to rearrange a medical appointment if you have had recent symptoms.
- At home clean and disinfect surfaces in bathrooms, kitchens and other areas that may be contaminated. Bleach based household cleaners are most effective.
- At home do not share towels and flannels with others and wash any clothing or bedding that could have become contaminated with the virus separately from uncontaminated items using a hot wash to ensure the virus is killed.
- Avoid visiting hospitals if you have had the typical symptoms of viral gastroenteritis in the past 72 hours. Norovirus is more serious and even more easily spread among people who are already ill. Visitors should not visit if unwell, or until clear of symptoms for 72 hours.

**Further information**

More details are available from the ward staff and our website. You may also find the following websites helpful:

- NHS Choices www.nhs.uk
- Health Protection Agency www.hpa.org.uk
- Patient UK www.patient.co.uk
- Department of Health www.dh.gov.uk

**In the event of an outbreak of gastroenteritis the following leaflet is available: Information for patients and visitors leaflet ‘Diarrhoea and/or vomiting outbreak’.

You can contact the infection prevention team on 023 8120 4672.