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The symptoms of norovirus are debilitating, disgusting and sometimes even deadly. With an estimated 685 million cases per year and 200,000 deaths, it's important to know how to stop its spread.

What is norovirus?

It's a highly contagious virus that irritates and inflames your stomach and gut, leading to stomach cramps, vomiting and diarrhoea. Headache, muscle ache and fever are also possible.

To catch norovirus, you have to swallow it. That means swallowing particles from someone else's vomit or faeces (yum). Whilst nobody would intentionally do this, it takes only about 18 virus particles to make you sick; an infected person can shed billions of them.

When norovirus is in your neighbourhood, here's how to keep it away from your alimentary canal.

Wash your hands

Since norovirus is usually transmitted from your hand to your mouth (unless you inhale particles from a projectile vomit [4]…), Dr Shobita Rajagopalan, Infectious Disease Specialist in Los Angeles, says that "appropriate hand hygiene, preferably with soap and water, is probably the single most important way to prevent norovirus transmission".

Whilst we can put a man on the moon, the art of handwashing has yet to be mastered. Do you always wash your hands before food preparation or eating? Do you dutifully dry them? In the absence of an air dryer, do you use the paper towel to close the tap? How long do you wash for? NHS UK [5] suggests handwashing should last as long as it takes to sing the 'Happy Birthday' song through twice.

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Stay home

Public Health England [6] warns everyone experiencing symptoms to stay at home and to telephone 111 for advice if necessary. Quarantine should continue until 48 hours after symptoms have resolved.

Clean surfaces

Norovirus can survive for days on surfaces, lying in wait to latch onto your fingers. Many common disinfectants can't kill norovirus, but a concentrated solution of bleach and water should work (read here [7] for alternatives for special surfaces).

Toilets, taps, telephones, touch screens [8], linens and door handles should all be targeted. Think creatively in your cleaning too: in one nursing home, the virus was isolated to an elevator button.

Food hygiene

Through contaminated food, you can become infected by norovirus (through eating it) or infect someone else (through preparing it). Trouble is, norovirus is relatively resistant to heat, so make sure food reaches the recommended cooking temperatures. Hand hygiene is also important (for the chef and the diner).

Close wards or create cohorts

For most people, norovirus is a short-lived, self-limiting disease. But for the frail elderly, and those with weakened immune systems, dehydration and even death can result. That's why it's important to separate symptomatic patients in hospitals or nursing homes.

Sometimes infected individuals can be cohorted together, and a nurse dedicated to their care. (As a nurse, I've had that dubious honour before). Other times, entire wards or homes are closed to stop the spread.

Rest plenty

Keeping your immune system [9] strong and healthy will help you fight infection. Sleep helps your immune system function better; some foods [10] may also help you fight back.

Cancel your cruise

Dr Jeffrey Fisher writes that "norovirus is the leading cause of shipboard illness….the source of cruise ship outbreaks is often embarking asymptomatic passengers".

Don't embark while ill. When infected with norovirus though, you may not show symptoms for 24 to 48 hours – and so may unwittingly take the infection onboard, where it can spread very quickly. Quarantine in your cabin awaits.

Be educated

In one study, one third of cruise passengers knew nothing about norovirus. Dr Fisher recommends tannoy announcements, texts and pre-cruise pamphlets to teach about norovirus and the worth of handwashing.

Hope for a vaccine

“Norovirus is one of the deadliest human pathogens that we know the least about,” said Craig B. Wilen, MD, PhD, instructor in pathology. “Of the viruses worldwide for which there are no antiviral drugs or vaccines, norovirus arguably kills the most people.”

Scientists are urgently seeking a vaccine; trials are testing them out. Watch this space. Wash your hands.



Source URL:https://helencowan.co.uk/9-ways-avoid-norovirus

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