

INFORMATION SHEET

Viral Gastroenteritis (“Stomach Flu”)

What is it?

Viral gastroenteritis, also known as ‘stomach flu’, is a common illness. It can occur as a case in just one person or can quickly spread through families and cause outbreaks. Though it is often called ‘stomach flu’, it is not influenza. One of the common viruses causing gastroenteritis is the **Norovirus**.

Viral gastroenteritis outbreaks occur in the community almost every year. They are common in nursing homes, daycare centres, schools, children’s camps and on cruise ships. There are several different viruses that cause illness with vomiting and diarrhea and result in outbreaks. Often the actual virus causing the illness is not identified as people recover quickly and do not have testing done.

Within one or two days of being exposed to the *Norovirus*, a person may have an upset stomach and start vomiting, often followed with cramping, chills, fever and diarrhea. Illness usually lasts for one to three days and people usually get better with no treatment. **Sometimes complications develop if people lose too much fluid from vomiting and diarrhea and are not drinking enough fluid to replace the losses.** This is more likely to happen to babies and elderly people.

How is it spread?

Norovirus can be found in the vomit and stool (diarrhea) of people who are infected. We spread it when we don’t wash our hands well enough after using the toilet or cleaning up after someone has been sick. Also, the virus can spread in the air in droplets that are too small to see. This happens with vomiting and diarrhea or even with cleaning up afterwards. The droplets can land in our noses and mouths and then infect us, making us sick. The droplets also land on things in the area like toys, countertops or sink taps where the viruses in them can live for a long time. The virus can then spread by getting on our hands and then to our mouths or into things like food, water or ice. This helps explain how so many people get sick in a home so quickly.

How can it be prevented?

One of the most important ways of preventing or reducing spread is **hand washing**.

- A proper hand wash needs warm running water, soap and lots of good hand rubbing for at least 30 seconds.
- After someone vomits, it is important to clean up the area with hot water and soap and then to disinfect the area to kill the virus. (See the next page for how to clean and disinfect.)
- Any food that has been handled by someone who is sick with vomiting and/or diarrhea should be thrown out. Food that was uncovered when someone vomited nearby in the room should also be thrown out unless the food will be brought to a boil on the stove or cooked in the oven before being eaten. Dishes or utensils should be washed in a dishwasher or in a sink with hot water and dish detergent.
- Laundry should be washed in hot water and laundry detergent.
- Bathrooms need special attention because they are likely places for contamination with viruses. If there is an outbreak in a home or institution, bathrooms should be disinfected with a dilute bleach solution.
- People who are ill and who handle food (in a store, restaurant, etc.) or provide care for others at work should **stay away from work while they are sick and for 3 days after they are better**. Even when diarrhea and vomiting have stopped, the virus can still be in the stool (bowel movement) for a few days. **Careful hand washing should continue.**

Is there any treatment?

There is no antibiotic that can kill the viruses causing the vomiting and diarrhea and make you better right away. When a virus causes vomiting and diarrhea, you usually get better on your own within a few days. It is important that you drink enough clear fluids so you don’t get dehydrated. Sips of water are good, but you should also drink other fluids like juices, clear soups or fluids specially made for use when people have vomiting or diarrhea. Packets to make these special fluids are in drugstores (eg. Gastrolyte, Pedialyte).

If diarrhea or vomiting lasts more than two to three days, you should phone your doctor’s office. You should also speak with a doctor if you’re worried about being dehydrated or having other symptoms that you think need a doctor’s care. You may want to call the **24-Hour BC HealthGuide NurseLine** for advice about whether you need to call a doctor (**at 604-215-4700 or 1-866-215-4700 or 1-TTY-4700 if hearing impaired**). **Translation services are available.**

What can I do when someone is sick with vomiting and diarrhea?

Sometimes several members of a family will become sick from eating or drinking something that was contaminated with a virus. When this happens, they usually all become ill with vomiting or diarrhea within a day. It is really important to clean up the vomit as soon as possible and to disinfect the house by cleaning and disinfecting the floors, counters and furniture when the sickness is over. Visitors who come to the house can easily become infected, so having friends over while people in the house are sick is not a good idea. It is best to wait for a couple days after everyone is better and the house is cleaned and disinfected.

More commonly, one person in a family gets the virus and can easily spread it to others in the family. Others may get sick a day or two later. When only one person is sick with vomiting or diarrhea, it is a good idea for that person to try to keep to a separate room and not be around others any more than is necessary. Everyone in the family should wash hands often and really well with soap and water. Using separate towels or paper towels for drying hands can help to keep more people from getting sick.



What cleaning solutions should I use?

Use hot water and soap to clean up areas contaminated by vomit or diarrhea, then disinfect with a dilute bleach solution (see below). Household cleaners other than bleach are not effective for most of the viruses that commonly cause vomiting and diarrhea. Bleach is corrosive and may bleach fabrics. Remember that bleach needs to be stored safely out of the reach of children.

To make up a dilute solution of bleach in a pail:

add 1/3 cup of bleach to 1 gallon of water

OR

80 ml of bleach to 4 litres of water

(this is 1 part of bleach in 50 parts of water)

How can I reduce the risk of getting infected from cleaning up vomit or diarrhea?

The person cleaning up the vomit or diarrhea can reduce the risk of getting infected by:

- Wearing disposable gloves, if possible.
- Using paper towels to soak up excess liquid and putting the paper towels and any solid matter directly into a plastic garbage bag.
- Cleaning the soiled area with soap and hot water. The same cleaning cloth or sponge should not be used to clean other areas of the house as this may spread the virus.
- Disinfecting the area that was washed with the freshly-made dilute bleach solution.
- Putting all cleaning cloths and gloves into a plastic garbage bag.
- Washing hands really well using soap and warm running water for at least 30 seconds.

What cleaning around the house is recommended?

- Clean bathrooms frequently and disinfect with bleach.
- Clean and disinfect toilets, sinks and any area that people touch (doorknobs, handrails, etc...)
- Do not share towels among household members.
- Quickly machine-wash any towels used by sick household members.
- Throw out any exposed food, including food handled by sick family members or that was uncovered when someone vomited nearby unless the food will be billed on the stove or cooked in the oven before eaten.
- Wash all dishes, glasses, and utensils with hot soapy water and rinse in hot water or, if possible, in a dishwasher using a "hot cycle".
- Wash any contaminated bedding as soon as possible with the washing machine on a "hot cycle".
- Clean contaminated carpets with soap and hot water, and then steam-clean, if possible.

