

Why is norovirus a problem?

Norovirus is difficult to deactivate. Most disinfectants don't work, especially when vomit or other body fluids are present.

All viruses are tiny and are not visible to the naked eye or even under the microscope. So we don't know if norovirus is present even if the surface looks very clean. Also, the common methods that are used to determine the presence of bacteria on surfaces don't work for viruses.

Norovirus in hospitals

Hospital is a perfect environment for norovirus to spread. There are many patients and people who visit every day. They all touch surfaces around them and can spread norovirus around if they are infected. Many outbreaks in hospital start because of an infected patient or a visitor. This is why visitors are asked not to visit when they are ill.

Staff also go everywhere in a hospital and touch different patients and equipment. This is why you can see staff washing their hands so often!

Outbreaks in hospitals happen often, but not necessarily because of poor hospital hygiene. It is very difficult to control all the people in a hospital and prevent them from touching anything.

This leaflet is produced by
Healthcare Infection Society (HIS)

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Norovirus and handwashing

Find out more about
norovirus and why
handwashing is the best
thing you can do to protect
yourself and others.



What is norovirus?

Norovirus is also known as the 'winter vomiting bug'. It is a virus that causes vomiting, diarrhoea and sometimes other symptoms. Despite its nickname, norovirus can affect people at any time in the year.

The symptoms of infection can be unpleasant, but most people recover within two days. However, this virus can be dangerous for people with a weaker immune system.

How does norovirus spread?

Norovirus spreads very easily. In hospital, the most common way you can get it is from another person. Outside of hospital, you can get it from another person or from a contaminated food item.

Another way by which the virus can spread is through indirect contact. This happens when people with norovirus touch different surfaces which are then touched by others.

Sometimes people can get infected because they touched surfaces from which vomit or diarrhoea was not properly cleaned.

How to avoid spreading norovirus in hospital

It is everyone's responsibility to make sure that norovirus doesn't spread to others. Here are some ideas about how you can help:

- Avoid sharing personal items with other patients, especially if they suffer from vomiting or diarrhoea.
- If the bathrooms or the area around your bedside are dirty, ask that they are cleaned. Do not attempt to do this yourself.
- If you see anyone with vomiting or diarrhoea, inform a member of staff.
- Do not attempt to clear up vomit or diarrhoea yourself, ask a member of staff to do this.
- Do not be afraid to ask staff if they have cleaned both their hands and the equipment they are going to use.
- Ask your visitors not to visit you for 48 hours after they have had vomiting or diarrhoea.
- Washing your hands whenever possible is the best thing you can do to avoid catching norovirus in hospital and spreading it to others.

Keeping your hands clean helps prevent the spread of norovirus.

If you need help with cleaning your hands, ask a member of staff. If you find it difficult to wash your hands at the sink, staff can give you alternatives such as hand wipes.

Hand hygiene

Remember these five important points in time for cleaning your hands:

- 1 When you enter or leave your ward or your room.
- 2 Before and after you touch your wounds, mouth, nose or any tubes entering your body.
- 3 After using the toilet, bedpan or commode.
- 4 Before you eat, drink or take your medications.
- 5 After you have touched surfaces which are touched by many people (e.g. door handles).

You should spend about 60 seconds cleaning your hands each time.

Alcohol hand rub

Alcohol hand rub may be great for cleaning your hands quickly, but it is not very good against norovirus. Avoid using alcohol hand rub if your hands are visibly dirty, if you have vomiting or diarrhoea or if you know norovirus is present in your ward.

To wash your hands with soap and water

Try to use soap and water whenever possible.

- Wet your hands under warm running water.
- Apply enough soap to cover all surfaces.
- Rub your hands together, covering all surfaces.
- Rinse thoroughly under warm running water.
- Dry thoroughly using a paper towel.