

NOROVIRUS

Microbiologists Expose Norovirus: It's as Common as a Cold

In the past year, outbreaks of the stomach flu were triggered by a highly contagious virus, infecting people on cruise ships, in hotels and nursing homes. The culprit of these outbreaks was a group of extremely common viruses known as norovirus, which causes gastroenteritis, an inflammation of the stomach and large intestines. It is so common, in fact, that norovirus infections are second only to the common cold in reported illnesses. Microbiologists estimate that norovirus causes 23 million cases of the stomach flu in the United States each year.

"Norovirus has been around for at least 30 years," says Aaron Margolin, professor of microbiology at the University of New Hampshire and director of UNH's Virus and Waterborne Disease Laboratory. "What appears to be a recent surge in outbreaks may actually just be the result of better detection and identification of the virus," he adds. However, he warns that people in all types of communal settings, such as childcare centers, nursing homes and dormitories are at risk for norovirus if sanitation and hygiene habits lag. "Norovirus infections are very contagious and can spread quickly in places with close living quarters, including homes with families, when there is a breakdown in sanitation," says Margolin.

Symptoms of norovirus are similar to those of the flu, or influenza, and usually include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramping. Some will experience a low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, and a general sense of tiredness. Onset of illness is often sudden but brief, with symptoms lasting about 1 to 2 days.

Like many other viruses, norovirus can spread from person to person through direct or indirect contact. Found in the fecal material or vomit of an infected person, the virus can spread if a contaminated surface or object is touched and then that hand is placed in the mouth, or if there is direct contact with another person who is infected and exhibiting symptoms. Infection can also occur if you eat or drink liquids contaminated with norovirus.

"People understand the importance of proper hygiene, yet are often lax in even the most basic activities, such as hand washing," says Margolin. Last year, the Global Hygiene Council reported that 69 percent of Americans surveyed admitted to not regularly washing their hands properly, despite the fact that 68 percent believed regularly washing their hands was the best way to prevent the spread of germs. Furthermore, 7 percent of Americans admitted they might not wash their hands after using the restroom.

These simple hygiene routines can help you, and your family, decrease your chances of coming in contact with norovirus:

- * Wash Your Hands -- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), handwashing is the most effective way to help prevent the transmission of germs. Scrub your hands -- including the backs of your hands, in between fingers and under nails -- with regular soap and water for 20 seconds, especially after using the restroom, changing diapers and before eating or preparing food.
- * Disinfect Surfaces -- Routinely clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces, especially after an episode of illness. The CDC recommends using a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved disinfectant to help prevent illness and control a norovirus outbreak.
- * Protect Your Food -- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables, and steam oysters before eating them. Persons who are infected with norovirus should not prepare food while they exhibit symptoms and should wait an additional 3 days following their recovery.
- * Isolate the Source -- Consult a doctor if you exhibit symptoms of norovirus, and most importantly, stay home. Nurse your symptoms in isolation to prevent exposure to others.
- * Remove Contaminated Items -- Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with norovirus after an episode of illness.
- * Eliminate Waste -- Flush or discard any vomit or fecal material in the toilet and be sure to thoroughly disinfect the surrounding area.

Source: LYSOL(R)/ Reckitt Benckiser, Inc.

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