

Norovirus: The 'gift' nobody wants, but many get

Protect yourself and others with proper handwashing. Avoid preparing food when ill.

'Tis the season of giving, but too many Minnesotans are giving and receiving something nobody wants: norovirus infection – and the nasty illness that comes with it.

Norovirus infection is the leading cause of foodborne illness and is very contagious. Thousands of people in Minnesota become ill each year. Found in the stool (feces) or vomit of infected people, the viruses are transferred to food, prep tables, faucet handles and other surfaces by the hands of infected people who have not washed adequately after using the bathroom.

Prevent norovirus by following important steps:

- Wash your hands with warm, soapy water for 20 seconds:
- After using the bathroom
- After changing diapers
- Before preparing foods
- Before eating

- Wash your hands more often when someone in your household is sick.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces with a household bleach solution immediately after vomiting or diarrheal accidents.
- Steam oysters before eating them.
- Avoid preparing food for others while you have symptoms and for at least three days after you recover.

“If everyone followed these guidelines diligently, we could eliminate the majority of the norovirus outbreaks in Minnesota,” said Dr. Kirk Smith, foodborne disease supervisor at MDH. “The season of giving should also be the season of good handwashing,” he said.

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If you develop norovirus symptoms, drink plenty of fluids so you don't become dehydrated, wash your hands often and don't prepare food for others, and contact your health care provider.

People become infected with norovirus by:

- Eating food or drinking liquids contaminated by an infected person.
- Eating uncooked shellfish that has been harvested from contaminated waters.
- Touching contaminated surfaces or objects and then touching their mouth or eating without washing their hands first.

November through January is the peak time of year for norovirus infections in Minnesota. It's not unusual to see a spike in cases around the holidays.

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that can cause inflammation of the stomach and intestines, leading to vomiting, diarrhea and stomach cramping. Other symptoms can include low-grade fever or chills, headache, and muscle aches.

Symptoms of norovirus usually begin one or two days after ingesting the virus, but may appear as early as 12 hours after exposure. The illness typically comes on suddenly. The infected person may feel very sick and vomit often, sometimes without warning, many times a day. Sometimes people infected with norovirus have no symptoms at all, but can still pass the virus to others.

Most people recover in a day or two and have no long-term health effects. Dehydration can be a concern in the very young, the elderly, or people with weakened immune systems. Occasionally infected people may experience milder symptoms for a week or more. Of note, even after people recover they still remain infectious to others for at least several days.

For more information on norovirus, visit the MDH website at:

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/norovirus/index.html>.

To report a suspected foodborne illness, call the Minnesota Department of Health Foodborne Illness Hotline at 1-877 FOODILL (OR 651-201-5655 from the Twin Cities).