

Norovirus outbreaks increasing in England

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) is reminding the public of simple actions that they can take to reduce the spread of norovirus. The advice comes after routine surveillance in England shows that the number of outbreaks caused by the vomiting bug has increased in recent weeks (4-week period from end January to February), initially in educational settings and now in care home settings.

Norovirus is highly infectious and causes vomiting and diarrhoea but usually passes in a couple of days. It is easily transmitted through contact with infected individuals or contaminated surfaces.

The increase in reported outbreaks was initially in educational settings, particularly in nursery and childcare facilities, with 48% more incidents reported to UKHSA than would be expected.

Reports of norovirus outbreaks in care home settings to UKHSA have also increased in recent weeks in 2022 – with a rise from 24 reported in week 6 (week commencing 7 February), to 40 reported in week 7 (week commencing 14 February).

While outbreaks reported in care home settings overall remain below pre-pandemic expected levels, it is likely they will continue to increase in the coming weeks and a rise in norovirus outbreaks in care home settings often precedes an increase in outbreaks in hospital settings. Therefore, it is important to take steps to limit the spread of norovirus.

Professor Saheer Gharbia, Gastrointestinal Pathogens and Food Safety Directorate, UKHSA, said:

Norovirus, commonly known as the winter vomiting bug, has been at lower levels than normal throughout the pandemic but as people have begun to mix more, the numbers of outbreaks have started to increase again.

Symptoms include sudden onset of nausea, projectile vomiting and diarrhoea but can also include a high temperature, abdominal pain and aching limbs. Stay at home if you are experiencing norovirus symptoms and do not return to work or send children to school or nursery until 48 hours after symptoms have cleared.

Please avoid visiting elderly relatives if you are unwell – particularly if they are in a care home or hospital. As with COVID-19 and other infectious illnesses, hand washing is really important to help stop the spread of this bug, but remember, unlike for COVID-19 alcohol gels do not kill off norovirus so soap and water is best.

How to reduce the spread of norovirus

1. Stay at home if you are experiencing norovirus symptoms. Do not return to work or send children to school until 48 hours after symptoms have cleared. Also avoid visiting elderly or poorly relatives, particularly if they are in hospital or a care home.
2. Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and warm water. Alcohol hand gels don't kill norovirus.
3. When an infected person vomits, the droplets contaminate the surrounding surfaces. A bleach-based household cleaner or a combination of bleach and hot water should be used to disinfect potentially contaminated household surfaces and commonly used objects such as toilets, taps, telephones, door handles and kitchen surfaces.
4. If you are ill, avoid cooking and helping prepare meals for others until 48 hours after symptoms have stopped, as norovirus can be spread through food contaminated by the virus when food is handled by symptomatic people or infected individuals.
5. Wash any contaminated clothing or bedding using detergent and at 60°C and, if possible, wear disposable gloves to handle contaminated items.

Norovirus activity has risen as people have begun to mix more – it is possible that unusual or out-of-season increases could be seen in the coming months.

UKHSA's National Norovirus Surveillance Team will continue to closely monitor all available surveillance data to ensure early detection of any unusual norovirus activity and outbreaks.

You can view the [National Norovirus and Rotavirus Bulletin here](#).

Those showing symptoms should avoid visiting their GP, but if they are concerned should contact NHS 111 or talk to their GP by phone.