Norovirus

Dear Alice,

I have been hearing a lot about the norovirus. What is it and how can I protect myself from getting it? I feel like there are germs everywhere, especially on public transit!

Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

It’s understandable that the thought of norovirus might make you a bit queasy. Norovirus is a highly contagious virus that causes acute gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach, intestines, or both) and common symptoms include vomiting and diarrhea. Although it’s unrelated to the flu (influenza) virus, it’s transmitted in similar ways: through contact with infected individuals, consuming contaminated water or food, and touching contaminated surfaces (yep, this can include public transportation). Unfortunately, there are no antibiotics or other medications that can be prescribed to treat norovirus infection and there is no vaccine. Keep reading for more on the infection and for ways to help reduce the risk of a norovirus infection.

Symptoms of norovirus infection often include nausea, stomach pain, fever, headache, vomiting, diarrhea, and potentially dehydration (as a result of other symptoms). They can range in severity, but usually only last for one to three days. If you’re exhibiting symptoms, there are a number of recommendations to aid you in recovery and to prevent the spread of the virus. It’s recommended that you drink lots of liquids (think water, sports drinks, broth, and oral rehydration fluids) to prevent dehydration. Dehydration, marked by infrequent urination, dry mouth, and dizziness upon standing, is one of the more serious possible related side effects, especially among children and the elderly. In addition to staying hydrated, if you have norovirus it’s also a good idea to disinfect all surrounding surfaces with a cleaning product that contains bleach after vomiting or using the bathroom. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends cleaning with a bleach solution of approximately 5 to 25 tablespoons of household bleach per gallon of water. Finally, thoroughly washing any clothes or linens that might have been contaminated with vomit or fecal matter is also advised.

Now, how might you prevent yourself from getting norovirus in the first place? Because transmission via contact with contaminated surfaces is fairly common, one of the best ways to protect yourself from infection is through frequent and thorough hand washing. If you’re
around many people during the day, or if you happen to be touching common surfaces (e.g., subway car poles or handles), you may just want to wash your hands more frequently. Though the CDC advises handwashing, alcohol-based hand sanitizer may still be somewhat useful if you can’t get to soap and water. Additionally, be sure to avoid or limit spending time with individuals experiencing symptoms to minimize your exposure to the virus.

Washing your hands after going to the bathroom can mitigate the risk of (re-)infection both before and after symptoms manifest. The virus can live in stool for two weeks (sometimes more) after you start to feel better. In addition to keeping your hands clean, it’s also recommended to wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating them. Finally, keep in mind that prevention is an ongoing process. Just because you’ve previously been infected with one strain of norovirus, that doesn’t necessarily render you immune to other types of the virus.

If you’re concerned, make an appointment with your health care provider, or you might check out the CDC for additional information about prevention methods and tips.

Alice!

Alice!
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