

# Norovirus: Information for Food Establishments

## *WHAT IS NOROVIRUS?*

Norovirus is the name of a virus that causes a very contagious illness often thought of as the 24-hour or stomach flu. However, this illness is not related to the flu, which is a respiratory illness caused by a different virus, the influenza virus. An infection with the Norovirus commonly occurs during the fall/winter seasons (September to April) and is spread through:

- ingestion of food or water contaminated by an individual infected with Norovirus
- close contact with someone who is ill
- contact with any surface contaminated with the virus (e.g. hands, counters, sink taps, bathrooms)

## *WHY IS NOROVIRUS A CONCERN IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY?*

Norovirus has been around for sometime, but very few people really know about it. The virus is difficult to identify and most doctors will not routinely test for it. Norovirus in an infected person can only be confirmed by the presence of the virus in the person's stool or vomit, so if doctors do not specifically request testing for the virus, it is usually missed.

Because Norovirus is so contagious, it can spread easily from person to person. Both the stool and vomit are infectious. It is therefore, very important for people particularly those handling food to follow good handwashing and personal hygiene practices even after they have recently recovered from the illness.

## *WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?*

Symptoms can range from mild to severe and usually include **vomiting and/or diarrhea**, as well as any combination of:

- nausea
- abdominal cramps
- headache
- low-grade fever
- muscle aches

Onset of symptoms may be abrupt and these symptoms typically last between 12 - 60 hours. Most healthy individuals recover quickly and feel that they are able to return to work. However, a person is still considered contagious for up to 48 hours **AFTER** they feel better and should not return to work until this period of time has elapsed.

## *HOW DO YOU KNOW IF A PERSON IS STILL CONTAGIOUS WHEN THEY LOOK AND FEEL FINE ?*

You don't. That is why you need to become familiar with the signs and symptoms and take the necessary precautions.

## *HOW CAN YOU REDUCE THE SPREAD OF NOROVIRUS?*

There are a number of preventative measures that a food establishment can take to reduce and/or prevent a Norovirus outbreak.

- **Handwashing** is the single most important preventative measure to reduce the spread of disease. Keep reminding staff to wash their hands thoroughly and frequently whenever they handle or prepare food, after using the toilet, and whenever their hands become contaminated.
- Mark the calendar (starting in September) to review information with employees on how to recognize symptoms of Norovirus infection.
- Sanitize tables, countertops, doors knobs and other common surfaces used by customers and staff. Often, the staff room is overlooked or neglected in terms of regular scheduled cleaning.
- Educate all managers on the signs and symptoms of the Norovirus infections, and ensure employees do not handle or prepare food if they are ill.
- Keep track of employees who call in sick. Keep a written record of their names, the length of time that they were off sick, the reason for their illness (e.g. cold, flu, injury). Advise them to see their physician.
- Remind smokers to wash their hands **before** and **after** they smoke. Cashiers who may have limited food handling duties may not think to wash their hands before smoking, but their hands are touching their mouths when they smoke, and surfaces and other objects (e.g. money) can be contaminated with Norovirus.
- Discourage the use of finger-applied lip balm.
- Do not allow staff to eat while working.

By following these tips, you might just prevent an outbreak of Norovirus from occurring in your food establishment, be able to quickly identify if an outbreak does occur, and be able to assist the Environmental Health Officer/Inspector in the investigation of the disease.

## *STOP CUSTOMERS AND STAFF FROM BECOMING ILL.*

***For more information, please contact your nearest Environmental Public Health office.***

*Edmonton Main Office  
Calgary Main Office  
Lethbridge Office*

*780-735-1800  
403-943-2295  
403-388-6689*

*Grande Prairie Main Office  
Red Deer Main Office  
[www.albertahealthservices.ca/eph.asp](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/eph.asp)*

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