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County Executive

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Commissioner of Health

# ATTENTION

## Public Health Update

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**The Westchester County Department of Health provides public health updates to members of the medical community on important issues affecting public health in Westchester**

DATE: December 27, 2013

SUBJECT: **Norovirus in Congregate Living Situations**

PLEASE DISTRIBUTE TO EMERGENCY ROOM, AMBULATORY CARE, INTERNAL MEDICINE, PEDIATRIC, FAMILY PRACTICE, PRIMARY CARE, INFECTIOUS DISEASE, AND LABORATORY STAFF

Dear Colleagues:

During the past few weeks, the Westchester County Department of Health has received and is investigating several reports of GI illnesses associated with congregate living situations. These have been lab confirmed to be Norovirus.

The Westchester County Department of Health is thus taking this opportunity to remind health care providers to:

- **Notify Westchester County Department of Health (WCDH) of any suspected cases or outbreaks of norovirus in congregate living situations at (914) 813-5159, Mon-Fri 8:30 AM-4:30 PM.**
- **Obtain information about congregate living situations e.g. assisted living, and occupation from any individuals seeking care for GI illness consistent with norovirus.**
- **Collect stool specimens for 3 types of testing, but prioritize viral testing for individuals with compatible symptoms - in viral transport media for viral (norovirus) testing, for bacterial cultures, and for O&P and hold the specimens at your healthcare facility or office until WCDH can arrange for the testing.**
- **If your office does not have the above specimen collection kits, please send your patients to an ER.**
- **Exclude patients from work, school, and other activities until they are symptom-free for 72 hours.**

Attached, please find:

- CDC Norovirus Fact Sheet

These materials contain additional information regarding the above recommendations for your use and reference and also are available on our website at [www.westchestergov.com/health](http://www.westchestergov.com/health). Click on Professionals' Corner on the gold bar at the top of the home page.

# Norovirus Illness: Key Facts

## Norovirus—the stomach bug

Norovirus is a highly contagious virus. Norovirus infection causes gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach and intestines). This leads to diarrhea, vomiting, and stomach pain.

Norovirus illness is often called by other names, such as food poisoning and stomach flu. It is true that noroviruses can cause food poisoning. But, other germs and chemicals can also cause food poisoning. Norovirus illness is not related to the flu (influenza), which is a respiratory illness caused by influenza virus.



### Anyone can get norovirus illness

- Norovirus is the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis in the United States.
- Each year, norovirus causes about 21 million cases of acute gastroenteritis in this country.
- Many different types of norovirus exist, so you can get infected and sick many times in your life.

### Norovirus illness can be serious

- Norovirus illness can make you feel extremely sick with diarrhea and vomiting many times a day.
- Some people may get severely dehydrated, especially young children, the elderly, and people with other illnesses.
- Each year, norovirus causes about 70,000 hospitalizations and 800 deaths, mostly in young children and the elderly.

### Norovirus spreads very easily and quickly

- It only takes a very small amount of norovirus particles (fewer than 100) to make you sick.
- People with norovirus illness shed billions of virus particles in their stool and vomit and can easily infect others.
- You are most contagious when you are sick with norovirus illness and during the first 3 days after you recover.
- Norovirus can spread quickly in closed places like daycare centers, nursing homes, schools, and cruise ships.
- Norovirus can stay on objects and surfaces and still infect people after days or weeks.
- Norovirus can survive some disinfectants, making it hard to get rid of.

### Norovirus can spread in many ways

Norovirus can spread to others by—

- eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus,
- touching surfaces or objects that have norovirus on them then putting your fingers in your mouth, and
- having close personal contact with an infected person, for example, caring for or sharing food, drinks, or eating utensils with an infected person.

### There's no vaccine to prevent norovirus infection and no drug to treat it

- Antibiotics will not help with norovirus illness because antibiotics do not work on viruses.
- When you have norovirus illness, drink plenty of liquids to replace fluid loss and prevent dehydration.
- If you or someone you are caring for is dehydrated, call a doctor.



### What is the Right Way to Wash Your Hands?

1. Wet your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold) and apply soap.
  2. Rub your hands together to make a lather and scrub them well; be sure to scrub the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.
  3. Continue rubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds. Need a timer? Hum the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice.
  4. Rinse your hands well under running water.
  5. Dry your hands using a clean towel or air dry them.
- See Handwashing: Clean Hands Saves Lives ([www.cdc.gov/handwashing/](http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/))

## 5 Tips to Prevent Norovirus From Spreading

### 1. Practice proper hand hygiene

Always wash your hands carefully with soap and water—

- after using the toilet and changing diapers, and
- before eating, preparing, or handling food.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers can be used in addition to hand washing. But, they should not be used as a substitute for washing with soap and water.

### 2. Wash fruits and vegetables and cook seafood thoroughly

Carefully wash fruits and vegetables before preparing and eating them.

Cook oysters and other shellfish thoroughly before eating them.

Be aware that noroviruses are relatively resistant. They can survive temperatures as high as 140°F and quick steaming processes that are often used for cooking shellfish.

Food that might be contaminated with norovirus should be thrown out.

Keep sick infants and children out of areas where food is being handled and prepared.

### 3. When you are sick, do not prepare food or care for others

You should not prepare food for others or provide healthcare while you are sick and for at least 2 to 3 days after you recover. This also applies to sick workers in schools, daycares, and other places where they may expose people to norovirus.

### 4. Clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces

After throwing up or having diarrhea, immediately clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces. Use a chlorine bleach solution with a concentration of 1000–5000 ppm (5–25 tablespoons of household bleach [5.25%] per gallon of water) or other disinfectant registered as effective against norovirus by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

### 5. Wash laundry thoroughly

Immediately remove and wash clothes or linens that may be contaminated with vomit or stool (feces).

You should—

- handle soiled items carefully without agitating them,
- wear rubber or disposable gloves while handling soiled items and wash your hands after, and
- wash the items with detergent at the maximum available cycle length then machine dry them.



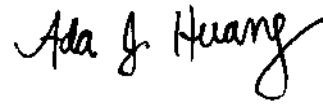
Visit CDC's Norovirus Web site at [www.cdc.gov/norovirus](http://www.cdc.gov/norovirus) for more information.

As always, your assistance and co-operation in addressing important public health issues is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Sherlita Amler, M.D. in black ink.

***Sherlita Amler, M.D.***  
Commissioner of Health

Handwritten signature of Ada J. Huang in black ink.

***Ada J. Huang, M.D.***  
Deputy Commissioner, Disease Control