

GI “Flu” vs Seasonal (Influenza) Flu

There is often a misconception that a gastrointestinal illness is the “Flu”. The Influenza/ Seasonal Flu is a respiratory illness not a stomach illness. There is no vaccine for Norovirus.

As colder weather moves in and people spend more time indoors, we often see an increase in cases of Norovirus, a very contagious virus and spreads from person to person. Anyone can get sick with norovirus and can shed billions of norovirus particles, and it only takes a few particles to make another person sick. Humans are the only source for these viruses. The U.S. Center of Disease estimates more than 60% of the population is exposed to one or more of these viruses by the age of 50. Norovirus is the leading cause of illness and outbreaks from contaminated food in the United States. It is problematic in nursing homes, hospitals, schools and on cruise ships.

A person sick with Norovirus usually develops symptoms 12 to 48 hours after being exposed to the virus by having contact with another infected person, consuming contaminated food or ice, water, or touching contaminated surfaces (like shopping carts, door handles, etc.). Most people will feel better within 1 to 3 days. In severe cases vomiting and diarrhea can lead to dehydration which can be dangerous, especially for young children and the elderly. People with dehydration may have dry mouth, urinate less than usual, or feel dizzy when standing up. Children who are dehydrated may cry with few or no tears and be unusually sleepy or fussy. People who are ill with Norovirus infection can also have a fever, stomach pain, headache, as well as tiredness and body aches. You can get norovirus illness many times in your life because there are many different types of noroviruses. Infection with one type of norovirus may not protect you against other types.

When you are sick, do not prepare food or care for others. It is important to wait for at least 2 days after your symptoms go away before handling or preparing food, working in schools, daycares, hospitals, restaurants or other places where you can expose others to Norovirus. Keep your ill children out of school and child care settings until they have not had diarrhea for 2 days.

It is important to protect yourself and others by washing your hands well with soap and water after toileting and changing diapers and before eating and preparing food. Alcohol scrubs are not effective against Norovirus. Carefully wash fruits and vegetables and steam oysters / shellfish before eating. Disinfect kitchen and bathroom surfaces use a bleach solution of 5-10 Tablespoons of 5% chlorine bleach per gallon of water or another disinfectant registered as effective against norovirus by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) following the needed wet time. Remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with feces or vomit.

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