Viral gastroenteritis Factsheet

Information for residents and visitors in Care Homes

What causes viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis is usually caused by Norovirus. It is a stomach bug that can cause diarrhoea and/or vomiting.

Why is it a problem?

Norovirus is highly infectious and is a common cause of outbreaks.

Norovirus spreads very easily due to the close contact between residents and staff. It is important to stop the infection from spreading to others.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of viral gastroenteritis usually last for 2-3 days and include nausea, diarrhoea and/or vomiting. People often feel generally unwell with a raised temperature, headache and aching limbs. The illness is usually mild and gets better without antibiotics.

The incubation period (time taken from catching the bug to becoming unwell) is usually from 1 to 2 days and people are most infectious when they have active diarrhoea and/or vomiting. Many people are still infectious in the 72 hour period after their symptoms have stopped.

Where does the virus come from and how is it spread?

The main source of infection is from an infected resident, member of staff or a visitor. The virus is usually spread from the vomit or diarrhoea of a sick person. When vomiting or diarrhoea occurs, a fine mist (particles) containing the virus is introduced into the air and can be easily spread to others in a wide area from:

- Direct contact with an infected person
- Contact with surfaces or equipment contaminated with particles of the virus
- Swallowing virus particles that are in the air
- Eating/drinking food or water contaminated with particles of the virus
- Consuming contaminated food, including shellfish which can be contaminated with untreated sewage

How can I prevent becoming infected?

The most important way to prevent infection is to wash your hands with liquid soap and warm running water or use non-alcohol skin wipes:

- Before eating and drinking
- After going to the toilet

Alcohol handrub or wipes should **not** be used as they will not kill the virus.

In a care home setting, if you do become unwell, you should stay in your room until symptoms have settled for 72 hours, this will help to prevent the illness spreading to others.

Will I need treatment?

Antibiotics are not needed to treat viral gastroenteritis. The main treatment is making sure you drink plenty of fluids, unless you have been medically advised to restrict your fluid intake.

Can I have visitors?

Yes, you can have visitors. They should be informed of the outbreak and may wish to postpone their visit to prevent them from acquiring the infection. Children tend to catch viruses very easily. Friends or relatives that are unwell or suffering from diarrhoea and/or vomiting should, whenever possible, delay their visit until they have been symptom free for at least 48 hours. In exceptional circumstances, such as end of life care, speak to the person in charge regarding visiting.

Do visitors need to take special precautions if they visit?

Visitors should wash their hands thoroughly with liquid soap and warm running water on entering the home, before leaving your room and before leaving the home.

Alcohol handrub or wipes should **not** be used as they will not kill the virus.

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