

Viral Gastroenteritis in Schools and Nurseries Factsheet

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Every year lots of children, in schools and nurseries, suffer from diarrhoea and vomiting. This is gastroenteritis. It is normally caused by a virus. The virus is known by several different names: Winter vomiting disease; Norwalk like virus (NLV); Norovirus or Small Round Structured Virus (SRSV). This factsheet offers some basic information about the illness and how to control it.

Very occasionally gastroenteritis in a school or nursery will be due to food poisoning. We have other factsheets available about food poisoning and its causes.

What are the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis?

Symptoms will vary, but usually include either:

- vomiting (often sudden in onset) or
- diarrhoea or
- both.

People affected might also have any of the following symptoms:

- tiredness
- fever
- nausea (feeling sick)
- aching muscles
- stomach pain
- headache

Symptoms begin one to two days after a person becomes infected. The illness usually lasts between one and three days.

How do I catch viral gastroenteritis?

Humans are the only known source of this type of viral gastroenteritis and the virus is found in the vomit and diarrhoea of an infected person.

You have to swallow the virus to become infected. The virus spreads easily from person to person in the following ways:

- Hands can become contaminated when using the toilet or changing nappies. The virus can then be passed on to others either directly or via some other substance including food.
- Virus can spread through the air after someone has vomited. This can then infect other people close by.
- Virus can remain on carpets and other soft furnishings for many days and this can infect other people.

How can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

(NB The Health Protection Nurses (contact details below) have detailed guidance available for staff on dealing with outbreaks of diarrhoea and vomiting)

Good standards of personal hygiene are essential in preventing the spread of viral gastroenteritis:

- Hands must be washed and dried thoroughly after using the toilet or changing nappies. Children are likely to need supervision to ensure their hands are properly washed and dried.
- Hands must be washed and dried thoroughly before handling food.
- Liquid soap and paper towels are the most effective items to use in a school or nursery. At home, separate towels should be used and these should be changed and washed frequently.

To prevent further spread of the virus it is important that any equipment or furnishings, contaminated with vomit or diarrhoea, are cleaned thoroughly:

- A dilute solution of household bleach (follow manufacturer's recommendations) is the most effective cleaning agent, but can not be used on carpets or soft furnishings.
- The bleach solution can be used on items such as toilet seats, handles, doors, and taps. It can also be used on floors and hard surfaces.
- Soiled linen, clothing and washable soft furnishing covers should be washed on a hot cycle of 60°C (if tolerated by the material)
- Soiled carpet should be cleaned thoroughly with a detergent and hot water (or steam cleaned, if feasible).

How long should someone with viral gastroenteritis stay off work / school / nursery?

- Children attending a school, nursery, playgroup or childminder should stay off until they have been free of symptoms for 48 hours and are well enough to return.
- Adults working in a school, nursery playgroup or childminder should stay off until they have been free of symptoms for 48 hours and feel well enough to return to work.

Who cares if you have viral gastroenteritis?

Always talk to your GP if you are worried about yourself or your child.

If there is a large number of children and staff with viral gastroenteritis then the local Health Protection Unit and Environmental Health Officers may need to investigate and offer advice to you and the school / nursery.

For further information and advice, please contact:

Merton Environmental Health Department on 020 8545 3024

Or the Health Protection Nurses for South West London on 020 8682 6132