

Infection control

'Winter vomiting' (viral gastroenteritis) -frequently asked questions for patients and visitors

What causes 'winter vomiting'?

'Winter vomiting' is a term used for a type of diarrhoea and/or vomiting that spreads like a cold or flu ('gastric flu') and is more common in the colder, winter months. It is caused by an infection: a virus called norovirus. Outbreaks occur throughout the UK, and are common in hospitals and schools where there are large groups of people gathered together.

How will I know I have winter vomiting?

People who have winter vomiting have sickness and diarrhoea for about two to three days. They might also have a raised temperature, headaches and aching limbs. Although it can be unpleasant for the person affected, the illness is usually mild and will get better on its own without any antibiotics.

Why is winter vomiting a problem?

Winter vomiting is quite infectious and can spread quite quickly through any close contact. In hospitals, large numbers of patients, visitors and staff can be affected. This can disturb the normal working of the hospital and cause distress to those infected and their friends and families.

How can hospitals prevent winter vomiting?

When there are high levels of this infection in the community, it is very difficult to prevent patients, staff and visitors bringing the infection into hospital. When we have one or more patients on a ward with a suspected infection, we are careful to identify it early and take steps to prevent its spread (see below).

If I have had winter vomiting recently, can I come into hospital?

We always ask people who have an infection to 'leave it at home' by delaying coming into hospital until they are better. Anyone, including visitors, who is unwell or suffering from diarrhoea and vomiting should **not** visit the hospital (including the food areas) until they have been **free from symptoms for 48 hours**.

If I have winter vomiting, how will this affect my care in hospital?

If you become unwell on the ward, we will continue to provide good care for you but we will also try to prevent other patients, visitors and staff from becoming infected. We might need to delay some planned investigations or operations until you are feeling better. Until you recover, you might be moved to a side room or an area in which other patients have the same illness.

Can I still have visitors?

If a ward or bay is closed with winter vomiting visiting is not permitted. However, in exceptional circumstances immediate family or significant others may be permitted to visit at the discretion of the Senior Nurse. Any such proposed visits should first be discussed with the Senior Nurse.

If you visit in these circumstances you should wear aprons and gloves and wash your hands on entry and exit from the ward.

If there are isolated cases in a ward but it is not closed, visitors should be kept to a minimum and they might want to think about delaying their visit. This is especially important if they are children or frail or elderly. If you have any concerns about visiting, please discuss these with your nurse or the doctor.

Are there any extra precautions for visitors to take?

We want to keep our ward areas hygienic and free from infection. We ask everyone entering and exiting ward areas to wash their hands frequently and use the alcohol hand rub before and after seeing patients.

However, in the case of 'winter vomiting' the alcohol hand rub is **ineffective** at removing the virus from the hands. Instead we advise everyone to wash their hands in running water at the sinks with the liquid soap products provided. Those visitors who do come to see you should be extra careful not to carry infection in or out of the ward area by washing their hands at the sink before they enter and leave. If your visitors need to do anything else, the ward staff will let you and them know.

What treatment will I have for the winter vomiting?

If we suspect you have winter vomiting, you won't need to have antibiotics to treat it - it should get better on its own. If we suspect it might be something else or want to be extra sure, we might test a sample of your stool ('poo') to make sure you don't have any other problems. The most important thing we can do for you while you have symptoms is to make sure you have plenty of fluids. Once your illness is over, no further action is necessary and your treatment will continue as before.

How will hospital staff try to prevent infection?

- Our staff will wear gloves and aprons while they are caring for you and when dealing with your body fluids.
- Our staff will be careful to wash their hands effectively after contact with infected patients and their surroundings.
- It is important at all times that ward areas are kept hygienic. When there are patients with winter vomiting on our wards, we are even more careful to clean the ward areas, especially the toilets. This will help remove the virus from the environment.

For further information, please refer to the Health Protection Agency.

<http://www.hpa.org.uk/>



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Help with this leaflet:



If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio format, please ask the department to contact Patient Information: 01223 216032 or

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Document history

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