

Norovirus outbreaks occur every year, typically during the winter season. This guide will help you create a plan to help you be prepared in the event of an outbreak at your facility. Having an outbreak plan in place will help your facility respond effectively and quickly.

If you have questions about developing a norovirus outbreak plan, call the Health Department's Infectious Disease program at 802-863-7240.

Visit healthvermont.gov/norovirus for outbreak management resources.

Staff Training and Education

Do staff members know the symptoms of acute gastrointestinal illness and possible norovirus?

Make staff are educated about norovirus:

- The most common symptoms are diarrhea, vomiting, nausea and stomach pain. People can also experience fever, headache and body aches.
- People typically become sick 12-48 hours after being exposed.
- Norovirus is spread by eating or drinking contaminated food or water, or by having contact with people or surfaces carrying the virus.
- People are most contagious when they have symptoms and for the first few days as they begin to recover. It is possible to shed the virus in feces for two weeks or more after feeling better.
- The most important intervention is handwashing. Consider doing a handwashing demonstration for staff and residents.

Do staff members know what constitutes a norovirus outbreak?

A norovirus outbreak is when two or more residents or staff are sick within 1-2 days of each other with the abrupt onset of vomiting **and** diarrhea.

Reporting Outbreaks

Who should be notified at the facility if a staff member suspects an outbreak?

Staff members should know who at your facility to notify when they become aware of illnesses. Ensure your plan includes a process to quickly communicate with facility staff that there is an outbreak occurring.

Which staff member is responsible for reporting outbreaks to state agencies?

- Outbreaks must be reported to the Department of Health 24/7 by calling 802-863-7240.
- Long-term care facilities must notify the Vermont Division of Licensing and Protection that you are working with the Department of Health.
- When the outbreak is over, complete an [outbreak report form](#) and e-mail it to AHS.VDHFoodborne@vermont.gov.

Specimen Collection

To confirm the diagnosis, the Department of Health Laboratory will test one stool specimen from a minimum of two different people. Your facility will need specimen collection kits.

- Consider signing up to be a sentinel site so that you have specimen collection kits on hand. To enroll as a sentinel site, complete the form at tinyurl.com/NorovirusSentinelSite.
- If you are not a sentinel site, call the Health Department at 802-863-7240 and we will coordinate getting kits to your facility.

Do staff know how to collect a stool sample?

- Follow the [instructions](#) for collecting a stool specimen.
- Watch the [how-to video](#) for tips on collecting a stool sample.
- Complete a [test request form](#) with each specimen.
- Coordinate with the Health Department to deliver specimens to the Laboratory.

Recommendations: Protocol During a Suspected Outbreak

Does your facility have a policy that excludes sick employees from coming to work?

- Ensure staff know what the sick employee policy is and where to find the policy.
- We recommend that staff stay home if they have vomiting or diarrhea. They can return to work when they have been free of symptoms for 48 hours.

Do staff know what initial steps to take during a norovirus outbreak?

- Encourage washing hands with soap and water for 20 seconds to prevent the spread of norovirus.
- Staff should use contact precautions for all symptomatic residents until they have been asymptomatic for 48 hours.

How will you separate sick and well residents?

- Separate residents into three groups to help limit the spread of the illness:
 1. symptomatic;
 2. exposed but not symptomatic; and
 3. not exposed and not symptomatic.
- Cohort staff so that they are not caring for both sick and well patients.
- Serve meals in residents' rooms.
- Put communal activities on hold until the outbreak is over.

What are the best practices for cleaning vomit or stool?

- Use an EPA-approved cleaning solution and ensure staff know how to use it correctly.
- Wear gloves and gowns when cleaning vomit or diarrhea to minimize contact with fluids. Wear a face shield when working with a resident who is vomiting.

Writing a Norovirus Outbreak Plan

- Ensure staff know where the personal protective equipment is located at your facility (e.g., gloves, gowns and face shields).

What is the plan for new admissions, transfers and visitors?

- Stop new admissions for the duration of the outbreak.
- Limit transfers, unless when medically necessary. When a transfer is necessary, notify the receiving facility that the patient is coming from a facility with an ongoing outbreak, even if the person being transferred is asymptomatic.
- Temporarily restrict non-essential visitors for the duration of the outbreak.

How will you communicate to staff when the outbreak is over?

- Outbreaks are generally considered over when there have been no cases after five days, or two incubation periods (the incubation period can be 60 hours).
- Continue proper hand hygiene, routine environmental cleaning and monitoring of residents for acute onset of gastrointestinal illnesses even after the outbreak is over.

Additional Resources to Support Outbreak Planning

- Vermont Department of Health's norovirus web page: www.healthvermont.gov/norovirus
- Responding to Norovirus Outbreaks (CDC): www.cdc.gov/norovirus/trends-outbreaks/responding.html
- Registered Antimicrobial Products Effective against Norovirus (EPA): www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2018-04/documents/list_g_disinfectant_list_3_15_18.pdf
- Norovirus Fact Sheet (OSHA): www.osha.gov/Publications/norovirus-factsheet.html
- Norovirus Guidelines in Healthcare Settings (CDC): www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/guidelines/norovirus/index.html

For more norovirus outbreak management resources,
visit www.healthvermont.gov/norovirus