



**NOROVIRUS:
THE NOTORIOUS
DANGERS**



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ACCORDING TO CDC, EACH YEAR NOROVIRUS SENDS ABOUT
2 MILLION AMERICANS TO THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE
— AND HOSPITALIZES AS MANY AS 70,000 OF THEM.



The symptoms are easy to identify: People infected with norovirus experience vomiting and diarrhea, along with abdominal cramps, nausea, and possible low fever. While they generally recover within one to three days, norovirus victims remain highly contagious for a few days after recovery. That means that your customers and employees can remain in potential danger even after their symptoms have stopped.

It's not difficult to see how a norovirus outbreak can seriously damage both your operation and your brand. With the widely publicized norovirus outbreaks of 2015, many food-service operations are paying more attention to this exceedingly unpleasant, easily transmitted illness and its potential effects on the industry, particularly during its peak outbreak season (November-March).

C-Suite executives and senior managers may be under the impression that even if a norovirus outbreak were to occur in their operation, it would be easily contained without much action on their part. On the contrary, they should be aware that without quick, thorough, and informed action from leadership, norovirus can spread very quickly, causing major harm in a short amount of time. This is not a matter of simply reacting to an outbreak if one happens, but rather of being prepared at all levels.

The message is clear: Having a plan in place to help prevent an outbreak of norovirus—and to help stop one in its tracks if it does happen—is crucial to your customers' health, your workers' well-being, and your bottom line.



SEGREGATE

- Segregate the contaminated area. After any incident of vomiting or diarrhea, the affected area should be segregated. As few people as possible should be allowed to come into contact with it. The fewer employees, customers, or others who are exposed to potential norovirus particles, the better. Note that norovirus can be transmitted not only through contaminated surfaces, but also through airborne inhalation.



CLEAN, DISINFECT AND SANITIZE, WHERE NEEDED

- Dispose of exposed food. Any food that has potentially been exposed to norovirus should be disposed of immediately. The risk of contamination to employees and customers is simply too great.
- Wear PPE. Any employee charged with cleaning an area where vomiting or diarrhea has taken place should wear personal protective equipment, such as disposable masks, nonabsorbent disposable gloves, eye protection, and aprons, per your establishment's policy.
- Clean, disinfect, then sanitize as appropriate. Areas where vomiting or diarrhea has taken place must be cleaned and disinfected. First, vomitus and diarrhea should be covered with paper towels to minimize the risk of airborne norovirus particles. A biohazard spill kit should then be used to clean it up. If such a kit isn't available, the vomitus or diarrhea should be wiped up with additional paper towels that have been saturated with a disinfecting agent. On carpets or upholstery, a biohazard cleanup kit should be used to absorb liquid. If one is not available, kitty litter or baking soda may be used instead.

The surfaces that touched the vomit or diarrhea, as well as nearby surfaces that are frequently touched (such as doorknobs) should then be washed with soapy water, rinsed with plain water, and dried with paper towels. All of those surfaces should then be disinfected, either with a product approved by the EPA as effective against

norovirus, following the labeled directions or with a solution of 1 cup chlorine bleach mixed with 1 gallon of water. The surfaces should be left wet for at least five minutes. Surfaces intended for food or mouth contact should be rinsed with plain water and sanitized before use. Steam cleaning may be preferable for carpets or upholstery.

If any clothing or fabric has touched vomitus or diarrhea, it should be washed with detergent, hot water, and bleach (if recommended) on the longest wash cycle possible, then machine-dried. If vomitus or diarrhea has touched the clothing of any employees, those employees should be sent home immediately. They should shower thoroughly and wash the affected clothing—again, with detergent, hot water, and bleach on the longest wash cycle possible, then machine-dried—before returning to work.

- Dispose. All paper towels used in cleanup, along with any solid matter, should be carefully transferred into plastic bags and double-bagged. A disinfectant solution should be applied over the paper towels before the bags are sealed.

Any disposable cleaning equipment, such as mop heads and gloves, used in the cleanup should be bagged, sealed, and discarded. Any non-disposable items, such as buckets, used in the cleanup should be disinfected. The employees who performed the cleanup should then thoroughly wash their faces and hands.



STOCK

BE PREPARED. HAVING PROPER SUPPLIES ON HAND AT ALL TIMES IS ESSENTIAL TO PREVENTING AND CONTAINING NOROVIRUS OUTBREAKS.



THESE SUPPLIES INCLUDE:

- Hand-washing equipment
- Disposable gloves
- PPE such as disposable masks, nonabsorbent disposable gloves, eye protection, and aprons
- Biohazard spill kits
- Paper towels
- Disinfectants approved by the EPA as effective against norovirus or chlorine bleach
- Disposable mop heads
- Plastic bags
- Buckets

ASSESSING YOUR READINESS FOR ACTION

Now that you know how crucial it is to have a norovirus response and containment plan, it's time to determine your operation's readiness to implement that plan for itself. The step-by-step list above will help you and your team benchmark your business's norovirus preparedness and close any gaps that may remain. Investing the time and resources to do so now will head off much potential expense down the road, both in dollars and in reputation.

With luck, your organization will never experience a norovirus incident. But should one occur, having a thorough and informed plan in place will enable you to help contain that incident before it becomes an outbreak. As in all aspects of food safety, the best approach is a proactive approach.

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ServSafe would especially like to acknowledge Dr. Ruth Petran for her contribution. Dr. Ruth Petran is the vice president of Food Safety and Public Health at Ecolab. Dr. Petran provides technical expertise and consultation to internal and external customers on food safety and public health issues, and identifies and tracks emerging food safety trends and control strategies.

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