



Briefing 15-66

December 2015

Norovirus and the cost of absence to the public sector

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Key Issues:

This APSE briefing provides information on Norovirus (the winter vomiting bug). It includes:

- What it is, what the most common symptoms are, how it is spread, how to limit the spread of the virus and what to do if you think you have Norovirus
- A best practice presentation from Aberdeen City Council on their proactive approach to infection control
- An overview of the cost of minor illnesses to the public sector from a recent CIPD report

1.0 What is Norovirus?

The following information has been collated from a variety of sources including: [NHS](#), [NHS Inform](#), [UK Government](#), [Scottish Government](#), [the Food Standards Agency \(FSA\)](#) and [the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

What is it?

Norovirus (aka “the winter vomiting bug”) is one of the most common stomach bugs in the UK; since the virus is always changing, an individual can be infected more than once and they are unable to build up any kind of long-term resistance to it. The rates of norovirus fluctuate from year to year, with years of high incidence costing the NHS alone over £100 million in England and Wales; due to the nature of the virus, we are unable to estimate how severe this winter will be, though studies have suggested there are approximately 3 million UK cases annually.

What are the symptoms of Norovirus?

The main symptoms of Norovirus include vomiting, projectile vomiting, diarrhoea and fever, while some people also experience headaches, a slight fever, aching limbs and stomach cramps. These symptoms normally appear one or two days after becoming infected and typically last up to two or three days.

How is Norovirus spread?

Norovirus is extremely contagious and is spread by contact with an infected person, contaminated surfaces/objects or the consumption of contaminated food/water.

How can I limit the spread of Norovirus?

The spread of Norovirus can be limited by being vigilant about having clean hands and a sanitised work environment, as outbreaks are very common in semi-enclosed environments; it can stay on surfaces and objects and still infect people for days or even weeks given the right conditions.

- **Cleaning your hands** - washing hands properly with soap and water and drying them after using the toilet as well as before preparing food and eating. Please note that alcohol gels do not kill the virus. Refer to the [World Health Organisation's How to guide](#) for the most effective hand washing technique.
- **Sanitised work environment** - According to the [NHS](#), in order to prevent norovirus spreading, you should "disinfect any surfaces or objects that could be contaminated [and they recommend using] a bleach-based household cleaner". With many authorities moving to self-clean in many work areas through efficiencies, it's important that staff are aware of how to properly disinfect their workspaces.

How is Norovirus treated?

Since Norovirus is constantly changing, there is no cure for the virus at present, therefore you have to let it run its course.

What should I do if I have Norovirus?

It is not recommended to attend work until 48 hours after the symptoms listed above have ended, as a person with Norovirus is at their most infectious during the first 48 hours of the symptoms appearing (although they may potentially be infectious both before and after this period). For the same reason, the infected person should not go to their GP during this

time and should instead make use of 111, the NHS non-emergency number for medical advice.

Staff should be reminded to consult their line manager/staff handbook to make sure they comply with their organisation's absence policies. For managers, the FSA suggests that "if you are in doubt about whether to exclude someone [from the workplace due to illness], it is advisable to take into account the nature of the likely consequences of something going wrong should you make the wrong decision".

The recommended course of action for Norovirus is as follows:

- Drink plenty of liquids to replenish lost fluids (non alcoholic, non milky)
- Take oral rehydration solution to replace lost salts/fluids
- Make sure your hands are clean (please note that alcohol gels do not kill the virus)
- Don't prepare food for other people, as the virus is easily spread through contact with raw foods

2.0 A local authority's approach to Norovirus

Kevin Masson, Team Leader – Cleaning Service from Aberdeen City Council delivered a presentation entitled 'A proactive approach to infection control' at a recent APSE Health & Safety seminar in Scotland which covers preventing the spread of Norovirus, as well as a section on the Council's approach to preventative cleaning and disinfection (Accelerated Hydrogen Peroxide – OXIVIR PLUS). A copy of the presentation slides are available online [here](#).

3.0 Absence and the cost to the public sector

[The CIPD \(Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development\)](#) reported the average level of public sector absence as 8.7 days in 2015. The median cost of absence per employee was £789. The report shows that minor illnesses (including colds, flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines) are the most common cause of short-term absence for manual and non-manual workers in public services (81% and 94% respectively) and has also shown to be responsible for a proportion of long-term absences (15% and 9% respectively).

4.0 APSE Comment

With the pressure on local authority workforces over the holiday season and changes within organisations to efficiency increasing measures such as self-clean workspaces, it's important that staff are educated properly about highly infectious viruses like Norovirus to minimise its impact on the workforce and on the communities that the workforce serves. As noted in the CIPD report mentioned above, "cultivating a healthy culture while managing cuts and change is perhaps the greatest challenge for the public sector".

While it wouldn't be fair to argue that all minor illnesses are contracted in the workplace, many are and through targeted action there could be significant financial savings for local authorities (a median of £789 per absence) as well as increases to productivity through having better levels of staff attendance.

[APSE's Performance Networks service](#) benchmarks staff absence statistics from our member authorities across a range of service areas and is the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking service across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our performance networks data highlights that the overall average staff absence across all local authority services for 13/14 was 4.06%, an improvement of 0.11% on the previous year and 0.51% since 09/10; this shows that local authorities have made progress in recent history towards minimising absences.

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