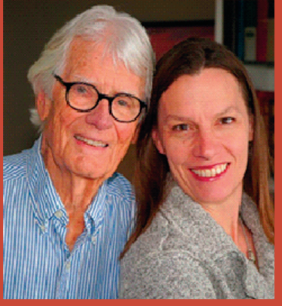


HEALTH CORNER



It's Flu Season But It's Not the Flu

By Diana Gifford

"The superfluous," said Voltaire, the French philosopher, "is a very necessary thing." Alas, his thinking predated our understanding of the norovirus. The norovirus is one of the most common viruses on the planet – yet it seems to be doing nothing useful, let alone necessary. It's just making hundreds of millions of people worldwide sick in any given year.

A lot of people made sick by norovirus think they have the flu. The symptoms are similar. But norovirus isn't the flu at all. It's a tiny, highly contagious virus that infects the stomach and intestines. It spreads through contaminated food, water, surfaces, and most usually, dirty hands.

The virus is found only in humans, not animals, and it doesn't need much help to make trouble. A microscopic particle is enough to make you sick. Once ingested, it multiplies rapidly and exits just as quickly, shedding billions of copies that can infect others. It's so efficient that it's been called "the perfect pathogen."

Most outbreaks emerge in familiar places like restaurants, daycare facilities, cruise ships, or long-term care homes. The virus is so hardy that it survives freezing, mild heating, and many cleaning products. Even alcohol-based hand sanitizers, so effective against most bacteria, don't reliably stop it. Soapy water is the best prevention.

Symptoms of infection include sudden nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramps. It comes on fast but is usually over in two or three days. Most people recover without lasting harm, though the elderly, very young, or those with weakened immune systems can become dangerously dehydrated.

Unlike other viruses, getting it once doesn't make you stronger. You might think that exposure would at least give your immune system a workout and lead to lasting protection. Unfortunately, norovirus doesn't play by those rules. Your body does mount a defense and produces antibodies, but they fade quickly – usually within six months to two years – and only protect you from the exact strain that made you sick. But norovirus keeps changing. It mutates its surface proteins just enough to fool your immune system the next time around. That's why you can catch norovirus again and again. There is literally nothing good about norovirus unless you count that it makes victims better appreciate good plumbing.

Scientists have been working for years to develop a vaccine. But so far, the virus's habit of constant reinvention has stymied efforts. There are dozens of strains, and new ones emerge every few years.

Norovirus often strikes just after a family dinner. Within 24 hours, one person starts feeling queasy, another rushes to the bathroom, and soon everyone is apologizing or looking for culprits in the cooking. But it's not the food. It's norovirus that came uninvited on unwashed hands.

What can we do? The answer is old-fashioned but effective. Wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially before preparing food and after using the bathroom. Keep kitchen surfaces clean. Cook shellfish thoroughly, since oysters and clams can carry the virus if harvested from contaminated waters. And if someone in your home is sick, disinfect using a bleach-based cleaner and handle laundry and dishes with care. Norovirus may be hard to kill, but it doesn't like hot water, chlorine, or good hygiene habits.

The larger lesson in all this is about humility. For all our medical advances, a virus invisible to the naked eye can still level us for days. Immunity isn't always cumulative, and strength doesn't always come from exposure. Sometimes, health depends less on what we can endure and more on what we can avoid.

This column offers opinions on health and wellness, not personal medical advice. Visit www.docgiff.com to learn more. For comments, diana@docgiff.com. Follow on Instagram @diana_gifford_jones

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Legion Branch 637

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\$10. P.P.

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 OSHAWA ~ Sat Nov 15th @6pm
 PORT HOPE ~ Sat Nov 29th @1pm
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 PICKERING ~ Sat Nov 22nd @10am
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