

Rotavirus Fact Sheet

What is Rotavirus infection and how common is it?

It is a viral infection causing diarrhoea in infants and young children. Children between the ages of 6 months and 12 months are most susceptible to the virus. By age 3, most children have been infected with rotavirus and have antibodies that confer some protection.

Rotavirus is the most common cause of severe gastroenteritis in infants and young children in the UK. Virtually all children contract a rotavirus infection in the first 3 to 5 years of life. Rotavirus infection tends to be seasonal, with the greatest number of cases occurring in the winter months.

How is Rotavirus infection caught?

Rotavirus is caught from an infected person or from a surface contaminated with the virus, which can survive outside the body for some time. It is very easy indeed to catch as the diarrhoea of an infected person contains millions of virus particles. The time from infection to the development of the first symptom is usually 1 to 3 days.

Rotavirus remains infectious during the stage of active diarrhoea and for some days afterwards. The total period of infectiousness is about 8 to 10 days from the onset of symptoms.

What are the symptoms of Rotavirus infection?

The main symptom is diarrhoea that usually starts with, or is accompanied by, vomiting and a mild temperature. The illness generally lasts about 4 to 6 days. Severe cases of rotavirus diarrhoea, as with all other causes of diarrhoea, can lead to dehydration and need admission to hospital.

How do I know if I have Rotavirus infection?

Many different kinds of disease can cause diarrhoea and so, to make a definite diagnosis, a stool sample must be examined in the laboratory.

How is Rotavirus infection treated?

Rotavirus infection, as with all viral infections, cannot be treated with antibiotics. It is most important that an affected child gets sufficient fluid intake while they have diarrhoea. Food intake over this time is much less important.

What can be done to prevent Rotavirus infection?

As rotavirus infection is so common in young children, it is not possible to prevent it except by the extreme measure of keeping the child apart from other young children.

Once a child is ill, hygiene in the household is all-important, particularly when changing nappies and clothes. A 'hot wash' destroys any virus on clothing. The virus is often transmitted from one infected child to another by contaminated hands or objects. Washing contaminated surfaces such as toilet handles and taps with soaps or cleansers will not kill the virus but will help prevent its spread.