NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

Centre for Disease Control

Rotavirus

What is rotavirus?

Rotavirus is a viral infection that causes diarrhoea and gastroenteritis.

How is it spread?

Rotavirus is very contagious and is usually spread by contact with an infected person or when contact with hands, objects (such as toys), food or water contaminated by tiny amounts of faeces or vomit from infected people are put into the mouth of an uninfected person. Spread can occur quickly in families, childcare centres and other places where young children who are not toilet trained are gathered together.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms are fever, vomiting and watery diarrhoea which can lead to dehydration and rapid weight loss. The infection can cause abdominal pain as well.

Symptoms start suddenly, between 1 to 3 days after being infected and usually last 4 to 6 days.

In adults who are otherwise healthy, a rotavirus infection may cause only mild symptoms or none at all.

What is the infectious period?

People unwell with rotavirus infection can pass the virus onto others and can continue to for several days after the diarrhoea has stopped. Most people are no longer infectious after 8 days.

Who is at risk?

Very young children are the ones most at risk of severe disease although older children and adults can also be affected.

Rotavirus often occurs in epidemics, however since vaccination was introduced in the Northern Territory (NT), outbreaks have occurred less frequently and affected fewer children.

It is possible to be infected more than once but repeat infections are usually less severe.

What is the treatment?

Anyone with vomiting or diarrhoea should drink extra fluids to avoid dehydration.

It is recommended that parents give oral glucose/electrolyte solution to babies and young children with gastroenteritis. This can be bought at pharmacies. If children refuse this solution, diluted fruit juice may be given (1 part juice to 4 parts water).

Babies should continue to be offered their normal milk feeds plus extra fluids in between feeds.

Babies with symptoms and young children who refuse fluids or who are very unwell should see a doctor as hospital admission may be required to manage dehydration.

Medicines to prevent vomiting or diarrhoea should not be given, especially to children, except when prescribed by a doctor.

How can rotavirus be prevented?

Rotavirus vaccine is 70% effective in preventing any rotavirus gastroenteritis and 85-100% effective in preventing severe rotavirus gastroenteritis. The vaccine (Rotarix®), is given as an oral vaccine (by the mouth) at 6 weeks and again at 4 months of age. It is important that babies receive both doses on time as the doses cannot be given after a certain age.

Rotavirus vaccine is still recommended for children who have already had rotavirus infection as having the disease only provides partial protection. Similarly, a child vaccinated against rotavirus may still become infected but the symptoms will be milder. The vaccine is not recommended for older children and adults.

Side effects following Rotarix® vaccination are rare. Investigations have shown there is a slightly increased risk of intussusception (a bowel condition) following vaccination. Intussusception is rare and the risks of rotavirus infection outweigh the risks of an adverse event from vaccination. Babies who have had an episode of intussusception or who are born with a bowel condition e.g. Meckel's diverticulum should not receive the vaccine.

Following vaccination, the virus can be found in the faeces of a baby for a week or even longer. It is not known if contact with the vaccine-derived virus could result in another person becoming infected.

How can it be controlled?

The spread of rotavirus infection can be reduced by:

- thorough hand washing especially after using the toilet, changing nappies or handling soiled items and before handling food and drinks
- not letting the runny poo escape from a nappy (disposable nappies with elastic around the legs may work better for this), careful nappy disposal and cleaning of nappy change areas
- never change nappies on tables or counters where food is prepared or eaten
- clean books, toys, equipment, furnishings, floors and toilets regularly (including toilet door handles) using a chlorine based solution.

Anyone with diarrhoea should not:

- prepare or handle food for others
- attend work, school or childcare for at least 24 hours after the diarrhoea has ceased
- swim, wade or paddle in public pools.

Exclusively breastfeeding in the first 6 months of life has been shown to reduce the risk of rotavirus infection.

For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control (CDC)

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Katherine	8973 9049
Nhulunbuy	8987 0357
Tennant Creek	8962 4259
Alice Springs	8951 7540

https://health.nt.gov.au/professionals/centre-for-disease-control/cdc-contacts