

Can my dog get sick when someone in our family has the stomach flu? It seemed like last week my daughter and our dachshund both had upset stomachs at the same time.

In the U.S., norovirus is the most likely cause of stomach flu in people. It can cause severe vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain that lasts for a day or two. It is very contagious to other people, even for several days after the person feels better. Nursing homes, cruise ships and daycare centers have frequent outbreaks. Norovirus is spread by oral contact with the viral particles- either by eating or drinking contaminated food or drink, or touching a contaminated surface and then putting your hand in your mouth. When an infected person vomits or goes to the bathroom, the viral particles are spread in the air and can be infective to others in the area.

There is a specific form of the virus that infects people and it was assumed that this human norovirus could not be transmitted to other animals. Very recently a study was published that looked at this issue. A research group in Finland collected stool specimens from 92 indoor dogs in homes where people had signs of gastroenteritis or the owner of the dog had close contact with someone outside the family who had. Tests were run on the dog samples looking for norovirus. In 4 of the 92, there was evidence of the virus. Some interesting points about the results: children were present in all 4 positive households, more than 2 people were sick in these 4 households, and two of the 4 positive dogs also had signs of stomach upset. Based on this one study, it seems that dogs can pick up and shed the norovirus, but perhaps only in cases where there are multiple ill people spreading quite a lot of virus in the house. It wasn't determined that the 2 dogs showing symptoms were actually suffering from norovirus, or had some other cause of their disease.

This study does show the possibility exists that dogs pass the virus in the stool, but did it infect them or just pass through and would it be infective to humans or other animals? More research is obviously needed. Perhaps household cats should also be tested, as they suffer from a type of calici virus that causes respiratory symptoms and is in the same virus family as norovirus. In the meantime, general rules of hygiene including hand washing, not sharing food/drinks/utensils with sick people, and perhaps keeping your pet dog away from sick kids in the house would all be good preventive steps to take.

Francine K. Rattner, V.M.D.
South Arundel Veterinary Hospital