

Isolating a Sick Household Member

The Medical Care chapter calls quarantine "the single most effective way to keep a stomach illness from taking down the whole household at once," in one sentence, with no actual how-to. This guide is that how-to: setting up the space, what "dedicated dishes and towels" means in practice, the cleaning routine, and when it's actually safe to stop.

Why this is worth taking seriously

Disease, not the disaster itself, is the leading cause of death in the weeks after most emergencies. In a household already under stress, without easy access to a doctor, a stomach illness that spreads to everyone at once is far more dangerous than the same illness in one person. Isolating the first sick person is cheap, fast, and the single best thing you can do to keep it that way.

Setting up the space

- **A separate bedroom and bathroom**, if your home has one to spare. This is the single biggest factor in whether isolation actually works.
- **If you have to share a bathroom**, clean high-touch surfaces, counters, faucet handles, light switches, and the doorknob, after every time the sick person uses it, not just at the end of the day.
- **Ventilation matters if you're sharing any space**. Open a window to increase air circulation rather than relying on a closed door alone.
- The sick person eats in their own room if at all possible, rather than at a shared table.

What "dedicated items" actually means

Item	Rule
Dishes, cups, utensils	Do not share. Wear gloves when collecting and washing them; wash with soap and hot water, or run through a dishwasher.
Towels and bedding	A separate set, used only by the sick person, until they've recovered.
Electronics	Phones, remotes, tablets, don't share, or wipe down before anyone else touches them.
Hand sanitizer	Not a substitute for soap and water here. Alcohol-based sanitizer doesn't reliably kill norovirus and similar stomach-illness viruses; wash hands with soap and water instead, every time.

Cleaning after a vomiting or diarrhea incident

Stomach-illness viruses like norovirus spread easily from contaminated surfaces, and ordinary cleaning products often aren't strong enough.

1. Wear gloves. Contain and remove any solid waste first.
2. Mix a bleach solution: **5–25 tablespoons of household bleach (5–9%) per gallon of water**. Use the stronger end of that range for a heavily soiled area.
3. Apply the bleach solution to the affected surface and let it sit for at least **5 minutes** before wiping.
4. Clean the same area again afterward with regular soap and hot water.
5. Wash any contaminated laundry separately, on the hottest setting the fabric allows, and take out the trash.
6. Wash your hands with soap and water when you're done, even if you wore gloves the whole time.

Keeping the sick person hydrated

Isolation prevents spread, but the sick person's own real risk with a stomach illness is dehydration, not the illness itself. If commercial oral rehydration solution (Pedialyte or similar) isn't on hand, mix a real one: **6 level teaspoons of sugar and ½ level teaspoon of salt, dissolved completely in 1 liter of clean water**. It should taste no saltier than tears; don't guess at the salt measurement or add more than called for, too much salt is its own real danger. Make it fresh daily and discard what's left after 24 hours. Offer small, frequent sips rather than a large amount at once, which is more likely to come right back up.

Watch for real dehydration, not just the illness itself

In an adult: excessive thirst, little or no urination, dark urine, or dizziness. In a child: no wet diaper for 8 hours or more, a dry mouth, crying without tears, a sunken look to the eyes or soft spot, or unusual sleepiness. Any of these, or the person becoming unusually lethargic or unresponsive, is a reason to get real medical care, not something to keep managing with fluids alone.

When it's safe to end isolation

As a general rule, keep isolation in place until the sick person has been free of fever and other symptoms for at least **24 hours without the help of fever-reducing medication**. For a stomach illness specifically (vomiting or diarrhea), wait at least **48 hours** after symptoms fully stop before treating the household as back to normal, since these viruses stay contagious for a short window even after someone feels better.

Contagious longer than you'd guess

Norovirus and similar viruses can still be present in stool for two weeks or more after someone feels fully recovered. The 48-hour window isn't a guarantee of zero risk, it's the point where the household's overall risk drops enough to resume normal shared routines; keep the extra hand-hygiene vigilance going a while longer, especially for whoever's preparing food.

Before you need it

Decide which room in your home would become the isolation space before you actually need one, the same way the manual's own Tier 2 checklist asks. Stock a small dedicated kit for it in advance: a spare set of towels and bedding, disposable gloves, and a full bottle of unscented bleach, so setting it up during an actual illness is a five-minute task, not a scramble. For handwashing technique and hygiene without running water, see Bathroom & Hygiene Without Running Water.

Sources

- CDC, caring for someone sick at home (isolation space, dedicated items, cleaning, ventilation): CDC
- CDC, norovirus prevention, disinfection concentration, and when to end isolation: CDC
- CDC, norovirus infection control guidelines (bleach solution strength and contact time): CDC

- WHO oral rehydration solution recipe (reduced-osmolarity formula): Dateline Health Africa
- Dehydration warning signs in adults and children: GoodRx; Nemours KidsHealth