



- Norovirus Activity in Washoe County

NOROVIRUS ACTIVITY IN WASHOE COUNTY

Washoe County District Health Department Epi Center would like to take this opportunity to remind local health care providers of the epidemiology of norovirus. The following recent events in Washoe County may be indicative of underlying activity in the community:

- ◆ Several laboratory-confirmed cases of norovirus have been reported in Washoe County in the past month. Norovirus is a common cause of acute gastroenteritis, and has caused several large epidemics in Washoe County in recent years, particularly in the spring months.
- ◆ There has been an increase in foodborne illness complaints received by the Environmental Health Services Program.
- ◆ An increase in over the counter anti-diarrheal sales has been noted in various zip codes in Washoe and neighboring counties.

Norovirus is now the official name for the group of viruses previously called Norwalk-like viruses from the family *Caliciviridae*. The main symptoms are vomiting and diarrhea. Vomiting is usually a prominent symptom but may be infrequent or absent. Diarrhea tends to be watery, short-lived and less severe than diarrhea caused by bacteria. Symptoms also may include headache, fever (usually low-grade), chills, and abdominal cramps. The incubation period is 24 to 48 hours. Unless complicated by underlying illness, age, or dehydration, the illness is generally mild and of short duration (1-2 days). Immunity occurs following infection but lasts only a short time. The many different strains of norovirus can lead to repeated infection. Treatment typically consists of supportive care, primarily fluid and electrolyte replacement.

Norovirus is transmitted when material contaminated by stool or vomitus from an infected person is ingested. Noroviruses are **extremely infectious**. Excretion of virus in stool begins a few hours before the onset of symptoms and reaches a maximum 24-72 hours after exposure. The viruses can continue to be present in the stool of infected persons for a week or more, even after they recover or even in asymptomatic infections. In institutional settings the virus is spread primarily through contamination of the hands of persons who are ill. Vomiting will also suspend viral particles in the air, resulting in contamination of the environment.

Noroviruses can remain infectious on environmental surfaces for many days and are relatively resistant to disinfection, heat, and cold. Noroviruses can also be transmitted by contaminated food or water. Food handlers with viral gastroenteritis may easily contaminate food or beverages. Shellfish may be contaminated by sewage. Drinking water can also be contaminated due to faulty plumbing and can be a source of these viruses.

Laboratory testing for noroviruses is not routinely performed and may not be available at commercial laboratories. For epidemiologic purposes, such as confirming the cause of outbreaks, testing of feces and vomitus for noroviruses by reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) is available at the Nevada State Public Health Laboratory. This requires fresh (unfrozen) stool. PCR can remain positive for at least a week after the symptoms have resolved. Health care providers who suspect an outbreak of norovirus (or other foodborne illness) must report to the District Health Department per NAC 441.A. **Please call 775-328-2447 to report disease outbreaks.**

Good hygiene, especially adequate handwashing after using the restroom, after changing diapers, and before preparing or consuming food is the best way to prevent the spread of noroviruses and other types of acute gastroenteritis of infectious etiology. Because norovirus transmits most easily where people congregate in groups, child care facilities, group homes, and extended care facilities are particularly high risk. Transmission of disease among residents of institutions or extended care settings is facilitated by the enclosed living quarters and reduced levels of personal hygiene that result from incontinence, immobility, or reduced mental alertness. Since gastroenteritis among the elderly often results in hospitalization and occasionally results in death from dehydration, outbreaks in this population require quick investigation so that appropriate control measures can be implemented.

For more information, please contact the communicable disease program at (775) 328-2447. Information on controlling person-to-person transmission of viruses in various settings is available on our website at www.washoecounty.us/health, click on "Epi Center" in the left-hand column.

Please share this alert with health care providers and infection control staff in your facility/office.