

Prevention and Control of Norovirus Outbreaks in the Community

NC Public Health Recommendations for Local Health Departments

Introduction

This document provides background information on norovirus infections, and general guidance for preventing and controlling norovirus activity in the community.

Background

Noroviruses are a group of related viruses that cause acute gastroenteritis in humans. The average incubation period for norovirus-associated gastroenteritis is 12 to 48 hours. Illness is characterized by acute-onset vomiting; watery, non-bloody diarrhea with abdominal cramps, and nausea. In addition, muscle aches, malaise, and headache are commonly reported. Low-grade fever is present in about half of cases. Dehydration is the most common complication and may require intravenous replacement fluids. Symptoms usually last 24 to 60 hours. Volunteer studies suggest that up to 30% of infections may be asymptomatic.

Noroviruses are highly contagious, with as few as 100 virus particles thought to be sufficient to cause infection. Noroviruses are transmitted primarily through the fecal-oral route, either by direct person-to-person spread or fecally contaminated food or water. Noroviruses can also spread via a droplet route from vomitus.

Guidance for Prevention and Control of Norovirus

Local health directors are responsible for receiving and investigating reports of communicable disease outbreaks within the community. When there is a strong degree of suspicion that the infectious agent is a norovirus, the following guidance is offered:

- Promote effective hand hygiene, including washing with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not effective against norovirus.
- Advise people with illness consistent with norovirus to stay out of work or school until 48 hours after symptoms have resolved
 - Identify those in “high-risk” occupations such as health care, child care, and food service who could potentially transmit infection to a large number of people
- Prioritize your outbreak investigations, targeting long term care facilities, congregate living, child care settings, and commercial food establishments.
- Assist area hospitals in accessing resources available through the NC Statewide Prevention Infection Control Program at UNC-CH (NC SPICE.)
- Target prevention and control messages to high-risk facilities such as long-term-care facilities, child care centers, schools and summer camps.

Local health departments should allocate resources to achieve the maximum benefit from control measures. Laboratory testing is not necessarily indicated to verify the existence of an outbreak once you have widespread illness within the community of an illness like norovirus. Public health efforts would probably be better spent educating the public to avoid illness by taking personal health action.