



Provider Health & Safety Alert October 5, 2011

Once again our Public Health partners within our response area have alerted us about a recurring health issue that affects our community. Currently, the Central Texas area is experiencing an increase in reports of acute gastroenteritis in schools, day care centers, long term care facilities, and school age children characterized by the rapid onset of nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. There have been confirmed cases that have been identified with the causative agent norovirus, also known as Norwalk-like virus. It is uncertain whether other areas are experiencing cases.

Noroviruses are extremely contagious. The CDC estimates that noroviruses cause at least half of all gastroenteritis outbreaks, nearly a quarter of which occur in nursing homes and long-term care facilities. The elderly and medically fragile residents in these facilities are at particular risk for serious health consequences. Thus, it is important to recognize the symptoms and apply control measures as early as possible to limit the spread of disease. Uncontrolled, these outbreaks can affect up to 90% of residents and 50% of staff. We see an increased number of outbreaks during the winter months because the norovirus flourishes in colder temperatures.

Norovirus infections are easily spread from person-to-person through fecal-oral transmission either via foods or contaminated surfaces; although a specific single cause is usually elusive. Noroviruses can also be aerosolized during cleanup of feces and emesis.

If your agency responds to a facility or school that involves multiple patients experiencing acute gastroenteritis either concurrently or within a short time period, notify your appropriate chain of command and the system infection preventionist.

Consider the following control measures to help you limit the spread of illness in your station which may then affect visitors, employees and their families, and other patients and facilities. The following control measures are most effective when implemented early and maintained until there have been no new cases of gastroenteritis for 72 hours from the facility(ies) that you respond:

- Ensure contact precautions are utilized during close patient contact. Gowns and masks must be worn along with gloves in order to prevent contact contamination on clothing.
- Enforce strict hand washing and glove policies for all providers
- Inquire about the possibility of norovirus when transferring/transporting patients from a facility experiencing cases of acute gastroenteritis.
- Ensure the hospital and other receiving facilities have been notified of the possibility of norovirus.
- Ensure the patient is "wrapped" prior to being moved to minimize environmental contamination.

- Provide adequate sized receptacles in the event of ongoing vomiting to reduce the aerosolization of viral particles.
- Perform thorough cleaning of all equipment that had contact with the patient or the environmental surfaces of the patient's room.
- Chlorine bleach applied to hard, non-porous surfaces at a minimum concentration of 1000 ppm (1 part household bleach in 50 parts water) should be used. Up to 5000 ppm may be used in areas of higher levels of soiling
- Ensure contact precautions are followed by personnel cleaning up emesis or feces. Gowns and masks must be worn along with gloves in order to prevent contact contamination.
- Should a provider become ill, require the ill employee to remain at home until they have been without symptoms for 48 hours. Upon their return to work, limit their contact with persons who are medically fragile or could be put at risk of severe complications if they were to contract a norovirus infection. Individuals may shed virus for up to 3 weeks post clinical presentation.
- Emphasize the need for diligence in hand hygiene.

It is vital that any control measures used are implemented quickly and sustained in order to prevent ongoing transmission. Persons with symptoms of acute gastroenteritis should be brought to the attention of their healthcare provider.

EMS providers have been instrumental in assisting in identifying previous possible infectious outbreaks in such facilities in the past. During a previous outbreak, because EMS notified ATCHHSD when 10% of residents/ 7% of total population of residents and staff were sick, ATCHHSD was able to work with the facility to put control measures in place to prevent greater spread of illness.

More information on noroviruses can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website:

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/norovirus.htm>

For additional guidance on implementing control measures and to report unusual incidents of acute gastroenteritis occurring during any of your agency's responses, contact the system infection preventionist. All outbreaks, whether or not a cause is known, are immediately reportable to the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department's Epidemiology and Disease Surveillance Unit.

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