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Stephen A. Martin, Jr., Ph.D., MPH
Chief Operating Officer

Recent increase in gastrointestinal illness in Suburban Cook County

Officials advise taking extra precautions to limit transmission risk.

Officials from the Cook County Department of Public Health (CCDPH) are reporting 25 clusters of gastrointestinal (GI) illness in schools throughout suburban Cook County. One cluster has been confirmed as Norovirus subtype G2; the other 24 are clinically consistent with infections due to noroviruses. The most common symptoms reported include vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps and low grade fever.

“We cannot stress enough how important it is to stay home if you or your child are experiencing any of these symptoms,” said CCDPH chief operating officer Stephen A. Martin, Jr., Ph.D., M.P.H. “Take extra caution to avoid contamination of your hands when tending to an ill child or family member and always encourage good hand hygiene among household members to limit transmission of infection.”

Noroviruses are highly contagious organisms that are capable of surviving on surfaces for up to 12 days. People may become infected by consuming contaminated food or beverages, touching contaminated surfaces or objects and then putting their hands in their mouth, sharing foods or eating utensils with someone who is ill, or sometimes through aerosolization of vomit.

Symptoms of GI illness usually occur 12 to 48 hours after exposure to the virus and may persist for 24 to 60 hours. Persons with confirmed or suspected norovirus infection must remain home from day care, school, work, and public gatherings for at least 24 hours after being symptom-free. Food handlers must remain off work for at least **3** days after being symptom-free.

CCDPH recommends the following for school officials:

- Report clusters of two or more students or staff with GI illness to CCDPH at: (708) 492-2150.
- Exclude persons with GI symptoms from school until they are free of symptoms for at least 24 hours; 3 days if the person is responsible for touching, preparing or distributing food.
- Reinforce the necessity for proper and frequent hand hygiene by teachers and students to reduce transmission risk. Soap and water should be used for cleansing hands after using the restroom and when hands are visibly soiled. Alternatively, when hands are not soiled, waterless, alcohol-based hand sanitizers may be used.
- Clean table tops, door knobs and other high-touch surface areas and those contaminated by vomit with bleach solution (¼ cup bleach to one gallon of water). Alternatively, an EPA-approved disinfectant with activity against noroviruses may be used.
- Persons cleaning up vomit must wear gloves and a surgical mask to avoid contamination of hands and inoculation of the virus into the mouth or nose.
- Refer sick persons to their primary care providers for medical evaluation.
- Assist CCDPH in obtaining specimens from symptomatic individuals for laboratory testing to confirm the cause of illness.
- Maintain a daily log of students and teachers absent due to GI illness and forward this information to CCDPH.

For more information, visit: www.cookcountypublichealth.org or call 708492-2000.

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