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Division of Disease Control

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Health Advisory

Increase In Gastrointestinal Illness In Philadelphia March 10, 2006

In recent weeks, the Division of Disease Control (DDC), Philadelphia Department of Public Health has seen an increase in gastrointestinal (GI) illness in Philadelphia as reported by health care providers and by syndromic surveillance of selected hospital emergency department visits. The illness, consisting of nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, is almost certainly caused by norovirus infection (also known as “Norwalk-like virus” or “winter-vomiting illness”). Although norovirus resolves without treatment in 1-5 days, it is highly contagious and spreads readily in group settings. Outbreaks have recently been investigated by DDC and other regional Health Departments in a variety of settings, including, nursing homes and schools. Norovirus has been laboratory-confirmed in some of these outbreaks.

The primary mode of transmission for norovirus is by the fecal-oral route. The low infectious dose readily allows spread by droplets, fomites, and person-to-person contact. Widespread environmental contamination with infectious vomit and diarrhea can occur with subsequent transmission of virus to large numbers of persons through contact with surfaces. Foodborne outbreaks occur when an infected food handler accidentally inoculates a food or beverage product. Communicability may extend for days beyond resolution of GI symptoms.

- Health care providers *must* report any cluster of GI illness that may represent an outbreak, as well as individual cases of “food poisoning,” regardless of the suspected etiology. Contact DDC (see below) to make a report and to obtain information on appropriate diagnostic specimens.
- When evaluating a suspected outbreak of GI illness, fresh stool should be obtained for testing for enteric pathogens, including norovirus. Vomit can also be tested for norovirus. Samples should be collected in specimen cups, sealed and refrigerated. DDC will facilitate testing of specimens, free of charge, at the Pennsylvania Bureau of Laboratories. If fresh stool or vomit cannot be obtained, a rectal swab should be submitted for culture of bacterial pathogens.
- Interruption of ongoing outbreaks of norovirus associated with institutions can be difficult, however, measures to enhance cleanliness and hygiene such as frequent hand washing and cleaning of soiled environmental surfaces may help. Symptomatic food handlers should be excluded from work until they have been free of symptoms for 72 hours.
- Norovirus is resistant to many disinfecting agents and can remain viable on surfaces for many days. Currently the CDC recommends disinfection of non-porous surfaces using a bleach solution with 1000 ppm of hypochlorite (1:50 dilution of household bleach) or a phenol based solution. Quaternary disinfectants are ineffective.

To report a suspected outbreak of GI Illness, please call the Division of Disease Control at 215-685-6741 during regular business hours, or 215-686-1776 after-hours and ask for the person on-call for the Division of Disease Control.