

MAINE PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT NETWORK SYSTEM



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****ADVISORY – Important Information****

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TO: Long Term Care Facilities, Hospitals, Emergency Departments, Infection Control Practitioners, Schools, Day Care Centers, Rural Health Centers

FROM: Dr. Sheila Pinette, Maine CDC Director
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SUBJECT: **Norovirus Gastroenteritis in Maine**

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Norovirus Gastroenteritis in Maine

Since the end of December 2011, Maine CDC has investigated 16 reports of gastroenteritis outbreaks statewide. Norovirus Genotype II has been identified as the cause of one of the outbreaks. Norovirus infections typically increase during the winter months, and Maine CDC routinely receives reports of suspected and confirmed norovirus outbreaks each year. Public health partners are encouraged to consider norovirus when assessing clusters of gastroenteritis and to act promptly to prevent the spread of illness.

Background: Norovirus infections are characterized by the abrupt onset of gastrointestinal symptoms, including nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramping. It is highly contagious and is transmitted in stool and vomitus. Exposure can result through direct contact with a person who is ill, by consuming food or liquids that are prepared or handled by an ill person, and through contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. **The virus can persist on surfaces for prolonged periods at a wide range of temperatures.**

Recommendations: In outbreaks and clusters of illness, diagnosis should be confirmed by PCR testing of stool specimens at the Maine CDC's Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL). Stools should also be tested for bacterial pathogens through private laboratories. Information on specimen collection and handling can be found at: http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/etl/micro/submitting_samples.htm. To report a possible institutional outbreak and to obtain epidemiologic support for norovirus stool testing, call 1-800-821-5821.

- **Community:** People with norovirus should be informed that infection can easily be spread from person to person, and that both stool and vomitus are infectious. Ill individuals and their close contacts should wash their hands frequently with soap and water, and should be aware that they can continue to transmit the virus for up to 2 days after symptoms have resolved. Infected individuals should refrain from food handling, patient or child care, and recreational water activity, until at least 2 days after symptoms have resolved.
- **Food Workers:** Food preparers and food handlers with gastroenteritis should not work until at least 48-72 hours after their symptoms resolve. Because the virus continues to be present in the stool for as long as 4 weeks after the person feels better, strict hand washing after using the bathroom and before handling food items is important to prevent the spread of this virus. Food handlers who were recently sick may be given different duties so that they do not have to handle food.
- **Health Care and Residential Facilities:** Refer to Maine CDC's norovirus guidance and checklist for long term care facilities. Transmission of norovirus infection to and from patients/residents and staff occurs readily, and cases of gastroenteritis should be reported to infection control professionals as soon as possible. Contact Precautions should be used when caring for diapered or incontinent persons during outbreaks in a facility, and when there is the possibility of splashes that might lead to contamination of clothing. Persons cleaning areas contaminated with vomitus or feces should wear surgical masks. Patients with suspected norovirus may be placed in private rooms or cohorted. Ill staff should not work until 48-72 hours after their symptoms resolve. Increasing environmental disinfection will decrease the presence of the virus on surfaces. Health care facilities may consider limiting admissions and discharges, as well as elective procedures until outbreaks subside or until patients can be appropriately cohorted.
- **Schools and child care facilities:** Alert parents when an outbreak is suspected and request that ill children remain at home during the symptomatic period and at least 48 hours after last symptoms.

For More Information:

- Contact the Maine CDC at 1-800 821-5821
- General information <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/norovirus.htm> and <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/infectious-disease/epi/disease/norovirus.shtml>
- Health Care Facilities: <http://www.cdc.gov/HAI/organisms/norovirus.html#a4>
- Maine Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/>