

Viral Gastroenteritis Outbreaks: Information for Supervisors in the Childcare and Hospitality Industries

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis is a common cause of diarrhoea and vomiting. Outbreaks can occur in child care centres, restaurants and hotels. Outbreaks in child care centres are usually due to rotavirus or norovirus. Outbreaks in hotels and restaurants are usually due to norovirus.

The main symptom of viral gastroenteritis is vomiting, which can be violent and profuse. Other symptoms may include diarrhoea, nausea, stomach cramps, fever, headache and muscle aches. It takes about 15 to 48 hours for symptoms to develop and the illness may last a day or two. It generally settles without further problems, and other than maintaining a good fluid intake there is no specific treatment. However, the illness causes distress and disruption to normal activities, and can be serious in the very young or the very old.

How is it spread?

Viral gastroenteritis is highly infectious. It can be spread in the following ways:

- by person-to-person contact (for instance when the virus is on people's hands)
- by airborne spread. (When a person vomits, large amounts of virus particles pass into the air as an invisible mist and can be passed on to other people in the same room)
- by swallowing something that has been contaminated through contact with infected faeces or vomit (such as food, or use of eating utensils etc).

Someone with viral gastroenteritis is potentially infectious while they have the symptoms and for at least 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

Anyone who has had diarrhoea and vomiting for more than 24 hours should see a doctor. The diagnosis of viral gastroenteritis is normally made on the basis of symptoms and through the testing of faeces or vomit.

The onset of vomiting in a number of people over a period of 1-3 days suggests that the infection is spreading within the establishment. The following actions should be implemented immediately to stop the spread of infection.

What needs to happen?

Exclusion

Children and adults with gastroenteritis should be excluded from child care, school or their workplace until at least 24 hours after the symptoms have stopped. Staff who

handle food should be excluded until 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

If the gastroenteritis is known to be due to norovirus, or if an outbreak is thought to be due to norovirus then children and adults with symptoms should be excluded from child care, school or their workplace until 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

Personal hygiene and cleaning

- Staff should be alerted to the outbreak, and to the need for scrupulous personal hygiene.
- Hands should be washed thoroughly with soap and water and then dried on a disposable or clean towel after going to the toilet (or after assisting someone else with toileting), after nappy changing and always before eating or handling food (see hand washing guidelines below).
- Surfaces that could have become contaminated (such as door handles, rails, phones, bathroom taps and surfaces) should be scrupulously cleaned (see cleaning guidelines below).
- If someone has vomited in a public area (such as a dining room or public toilet), remove people from the vicinity and keep the area closed for at least 1 hour after the area has been cleaned).
- If someone vomits in an area where there is uncovered food, that food must be discarded, the surfaces cleaned and disinfected, and the area closed for at least 1 hour.
- In areas used by children, particular attention should be taken to clean and disinfect surfaces and toys (see cleaning guidelines below).

Seek further advice

- Document the number of cases, dates of onset, duration etc.
- Inform the Population Health Unit which can provide advice and assist with specimens.

Cleaning guidelines

Hand washing

- Wet hands with water (not so hot that it might cause skin irritation), apply soap onto hands and rub hands vigorously for at least 10 seconds covering all surfaces of the hands and fingers.
- Rinse hands and dry them thoroughly using a disposable or clean towel.
- Prevent hands from becoming sore or chapped by avoiding harsh cleansers and by drying hands thoroughly.
- Encourage hand washing among staff by:
 - choosing hand washing products that staff find pleasant, non-irritant and easy to use
 - ensuring adequate supplies of hand washing products and paper towels
 - making hand washing an important part of the culture of the organisation
 - ensuring that hand washing remains a priority (and is adequately resourced).

Cleaning up vomit and faeces

- Make up a disinfectant solution. Use either Milton Anti-bacterial Solution mixed at a ratio of 50/50 with water (5000 ppm), or freshly constituted household bleach at a 1:10 dilution.
- Wear disposable gloves and an apron.
- Use paper towels to soak up excess liquid and place in a leak-proof plastic bag.
- Clean the potentially contaminated areas with detergent and hot water.
- Disinfect these areas using the freshly made disinfectant solution, using a spray-bottle for smaller surfaces, and a mop and bucket for larger surfaces.
- Detachable mop heads should be laundered in a hot wash and left to air dry after use.
- Clean the surfaces in the vicinity of the soiled area with detergent and hot water.
- Close the area for at least 1 hour.
- Non-disposable mop heads should be laundered in a hot wash.
- Wash hands thoroughly as above.

Cleaning specific items

- Children's toys should be washed in soapy water then disinfected using the disinfectant solution and left to dry.
- Soiled linen should be laundered using a hot wash. If an outside laundry company is used they should be advised that the laundry is potentially infectious.
- Soiled carpets should be cleaned with detergent and then steam-cleaned.
- Soft furnishings or metal surfaces that might be damaged by using the disinfectant solution should be cleaned with detergent and then left to dry thoroughly.

Further information

- Vomiting events in an eating area – cleanup advice (http://www.health.qld.gov.au/ph/Documents/cdb/vomiting_cleanup_adv.pdf)