

Massachusetts Health Officials See Increase in Norovirus Outbreaks

MDPH offers tips on preventing infections.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) is seeing a significant number of gastrointestinal illness outbreaks across the state this winter, which are likely caused by norovirus infections. Noroviruses are a group of particularly strong viruses that cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea in people who get infected.

Noroviruses are easily spread through food, by person-to-person contact, or through contact with contaminated surfaces such as countertops and door knobs. The virus is spread through an infected person's stool or vomitus. This contamination can then be spread further without careful attention to hand washing and environmental cleaning. Illnesses related to norovirus infection have an incubation period (time from exposure to illness) of about 12 to 48 hours and the signs and symptoms can last several days.

Because noroviruses are so easily spread person to person, long-term care facilities are particularly vulnerable to outbreaks. Since the beginning of 2012, more than 30 outbreaks consistent with norovirus have been reported in Massachusetts long term care facilities. MDPH staff have worked with each of these facilities on infection control procedures, and have provided guidance on environmental sanitation as well. An additional 11 outbreaks have been reported in other settings such as schools, prisons and hospitals.

Everyone can reduce their chances of coming in contact with noroviruses by following these simple tips:

- Frequently wash your hands, especially after using the bathroom, changing diapers and before eating or preparing food.
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables, and steam oysters before eating them.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces immediately after an episode of illness by using a bleach-based household cleaner.
- Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with virus after an episode of illness (use hot water and soap).
- Flush any vomit or stool down the toilet and make sure that the surrounding area is kept clean.
- Persons who are infected with norovirus should not prepare food while they have symptoms and for 3 days after they recover from their illness.

For most people, norovirus is a very unpleasant short-term illness, not requiring a visit to healthcare but it can be more serious for infants and children, elderly individuals and people with compromised immune systems. If in doubt, people should call their healthcare provider.

For more information on norovirus MDPH fact sheets are attached. A podcast about norovirus can also be found at <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/consumer/wellness/health-promotion/dph-podcast/dph-health-note-podcast.html>

As a reminder, outbreaks of gastrointestinal illness are reportable to local health departments. If local health is unavailable outbreaks can be reported directly to MDPH at (617) 983-6800.