



**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES
Office of Communications**



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“Stomach Flu” to Some, Noroviruses Are Up in L. A. County

Key to Prevention: Handwashing

LOS ANGELES – Los Angeles County has recorded an increased number of Norovirus outbreaks this winter; 23 outbreaks in six months compared to three during the same time the year before. Norovirus is also referred to as Norwalk-like virus and consists of gastric distress and vomiting. The incubation period is from 10-50 hours, usually 24-48 hours; duration of the illness varies from 1-2 days. The increase in cases locally mirrors reports from health agencies nationwide; outbreaks on cruise ships earlier this winter generated increased interest in this human viral infection.

“This virus is second only to the common cold as far as causes of illness,” said Jonathan Fielding, M.D., M.P.H., Director of Public Health and County Health Officer. “Personal hygiene, especially handwashing after using the bathroom and changing diapers, and before preparing food, are key to minimize the spread of this organism.”

A single case of illness of viral gastroenteritis is not reportable to the health department; however, outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis are reportable. Review of data from September 1, 2002 to February 21, 2003 revealed 23 outbreaks and four non-outbreak situations with available stool specimen test results that were positive for Norovirus. Nineteen of the 23 recent outbreaks have been reported from long-term care and/or assisted-living facilities. Four occurred at catered events held at various venues where food may have been a vehicle for infection. In comparison, during the same time period the previous year, only three lab confirmed Norovirus outbreak occurred.

The total number of affected individuals is estimated to be at least 407; however, this figure is preliminary and in a state of flux as some of the outbreaks are still being investigated and managed.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates 23 million cases occur every year.

Mode of spread

The virus is present in the stool or vomitus of infected individuals. Individuals are potentially infectious even after symptoms have subsided. Norovirus can be transmitted person-to-person via foodborne, waterborne, and even airborne transmission through spattering or aerosols of vomitus. Virus from stool or vomitus can also contaminate environmental surfaces.

“These viruses are quite contagious and the variety of transmission modes is one of the reasons outbreaks occur frequently in institutional settings such as nursing homes and day care centers,” said Roshan Reporter, M.D., a medical epidemiologist in the Acute Communicable Disease Control Program. “Fortunately, symptoms usually subside within 24 – 48 hours.

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Prevention

Because it is so infectious and resilient, transmission of Noroviruses is difficult to control through routine sanitary measures. Vigorous and frequent handwashing is essential as well as laundering soiled linens and clothes. Because environmental surfaces have been implicated in the transmission of enteric viruses, surfaces that have been soiled should be cleaned with an appropriate germicidal product (e.g., 10% solution of household bleach). In situations in which the epidemic is extended by periodic renewal of the susceptible population (e.g., camps and cruise ships), the facility or institution might have to be closed until it can be cleaned appropriately.

Public Health is committed to protecting and improving the health of the nearly 10 million residents of Los Angeles County. Through a variety of programs, community partnerships and services, Public Health oversees environmental health, disease control and community and family health. Public Health comprises more than 3,800 employees and has an annual budget exceeding \$465 million.