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PUBLIC HEALTH EPIDEMIOLOGY & ASSESSMENT

Viral Gastroenteritis Questions and Answers

Modified from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Viral Gastroenteritis webpage <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/faq.htm>, accessed 2/2/07, the California Department of Health Services (CDHS) "Norovirus Question and Answer" dated 1/23/07 (Supplement to Prevention and Control of Viral Gastroenteritis Outbreaks in California Long-term Care Facilities 2006), and the CDC Norovirus in Healthcare Facilities Fact Sheet http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/id_norovirusFS.html, accessed 2/2/07

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis means inflammation of the stomach and small and large intestines. Viral gastroenteritis is an infection caused by a variety of viruses that results in vomiting or diarrhea. It is often called the "stomach flu," although it is not caused by influenza viruses.

What causes viral gastroenteritis?

Many different viruses can cause gastroenteritis, including rotaviruses, noroviruses, adenoviruses, sapoviruses, and astroviruses. Some of the viruses causing gastroenteritis are seasonal and occur mainly from October through April. Noroviruses in particular have been implicated recently in many outbreaks in the community, in institutions, on cruise ships, and other group settings. Viral gastroenteritis is not caused by bacteria (such as *Salmonella* or *Escherichia coli*) or parasites (such as *Giardia*), or by medications or other medical conditions, although the symptoms may be similar.

What are the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis?

The main symptoms of viral gastroenteritis are watery diarrhea and vomiting. The affected person may also have headache, fever, and abdominal cramps ("stomach ache"). In general, the symptoms begin 1 to 2 days following infection and may last for 1 to 10 days, depending on which virus causes the illness.

Is viral gastroenteritis a serious illness?

For most people, it is not. People who get viral gastroenteritis almost always recover completely without any long-term problems. However persons, such as infants, young children, and those who cannot care for themselves, may be unable to drink enough fluids to replace what they lose through vomiting or diarrhea, and are at risk for dehydration from loss of fluids. Immune compromised persons may also get a more serious illness, with greater vomiting or diarrhea, and may also be at risk for dehydration. Some persons may need to be hospitalized for treatment of dehydration.

Is the illness contagious? How are these viruses spread?

Yes, viral gastroenteritis is contagious. The viruses that cause gastroenteritis are spread through contact with infected persons or items or surfaces that have come into contact with feces (or vomitus with some viruses such as norovirus) from an infected person. Surfaces contaminated with feces or even small droplets of vomitus may

remain infectious for days if not disinfected appropriately. Individuals may also become infected by eating or drinking contaminated foods or beverages.

How is viral gastroenteritis diagnosed?

Generally, viral gastroenteritis is diagnosed by a physician on the basis of the symptoms and medical examination of the patient. Rotavirus infection can be diagnosed by laboratory testing of a feces specimen. Tests to detect other viruses that cause gastroenteritis are not in routine use, but Orange County Public Health may be able to arrange for testing for norovirus if there is an outbreak or cluster of illness.

How is viral gastroenteritis treated?

The most important part of treating viral gastroenteritis in children and adults is to prevent severe loss of fluids (dehydration). This treatment should begin at home. Your physician may give you specific instructions about what kinds of fluid to give. Medications, including antibiotics (which have no effect on viruses) and other treatments, should be avoided unless specifically recommended by a physician.

How long after illness can someone return to work or school?

Viruses causing viral gastroenteritis can be shed in the feces for a couple of weeks after onset of illness, depending on the virus. In general, persons should not return to work or school at least until the diarrhea resolves, although depending on the setting, responsibilities, contact with other persons, and hygiene of the affected individuals, exclusion for a longer time period may be recommended. For example, foodhandlers and healthcare workers should be excluded from work for at least 48 hours following resolution of symptoms of gastroenteritis.

Can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

Persons can reduce their chance of getting infected by frequent handwashing, prompt disinfection of contaminated surfaces, and prompt washing of soiled articles of clothing.

Please see the section on Cleaning and Disinfection for more information.

Handwashing with soap and water is especially important after using the toilet, before eating, when hands are visibly soiled, and after removal of gloves after clean-up of vomitus or feces.

Viral Gastroenteritis

Questions and Answers about Cleaning and Disinfection

What should I use to clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces?

Contaminated surfaces should be disinfected promptly with household chlorine bleach-based cleaners, diluted chlorine bleach (see below), or U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved disinfectants. Household cleaners or EPA-approved disinfectants should be used according to manufacturer's recommendations. Diluted household chlorine bleach can be applied to hard, non-porous, environmental surfaces; a minimum concentration of 1000 ppm (generally a dilution of 1 part household bleach solution to 50 parts water) is recommended to be effective against noroviruses. When working with bleach, all recommended safety precautions listed on the manufacturer's label should be followed. If stored in a clear (translucent) container, the diluted bleach solution must be discarded after 24 hours; if stored in an opaque container, the solution can keep for 30 days. All containers should be clearly labeled and dated.

What is the best way to clean contaminated fiber sofas, rugs, etc?

The best method to clean contaminated furniture and rugs is not clear. Steam cleaning fabric-covered furniture alone may not achieve the necessary temperature required to get rid of the virus. Any particulate matter should be removed as thoroughly as possible prior to disinfection. Chemical disinfection of soiled areas prior to steam cleaning should be considered. Cleaning with detergent and water followed by liberal use of a disinfectant is another alternative. Test the chemical on a non-obvious area for colorfastness prior to use. If the object does not tolerate the disinfectant, suggested temperatures for steam cleaning are 158° F for five minutes or 212° F for one minute. Dry vacuuming is NOT recommended.

Are there special recommendations for cleaning contaminated laundry?

Contaminated clothing or other items should be bagged as soon as possible at the point of use. Soiled laundry should be handled with minimal agitation to avoid contamination of air, surfaces, and persons. Detergents and cycle times should be suitable for the water temperature chosen, following manufacturer's recommendations. Disinfection of washing and drying machines is not needed as long as gross soil is removed from items before washing, and proper washing and drying procedures are used. There are no recommendations for specific dryer temperatures or times. It would seem prudent to ensure that laundered items are thoroughly dried.