

Viral Gastroenteritis (VGE) Information for School Health Personnel:

Introduction

In outbreaks of gastroenteritis, schools often face the problem of having to take action without detailed explanation of increased absences related to gastrointestinal illnesses. Noroviruses are common causes of viral gastrointestinal illness (GI) in schools but other etiologic agents (bacteria, protozoa) can cause similar symptomatic presentations of gastrointestinal illness.

Mode of Transmission

Noroviruses have a very low infectious dose (<10-100 virions) and is easily transmitted. In school settings, norovirus may be introduced through ill students or staff. Typically transmission occurs through exposure to direct or indirect fecal contamination found on fomites, by ingestion of contaminated water or food, or by exposure to aerosols of norovirus from vomiting persons.

Incubation Period

12 - 48 hours

Symptoms

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal cramps
- Watery, non-bloody diarrhea

Duration of Illness

12 - 60 hours

Length of Infectiousness

Norovirus is shed for at least 48 to 72 hours after resolution of all symptoms. However, studies have demonstrated the presence of virus in the stool for several months after infection. Additional research is needed to determine length of infectiousness.

Treatment

For most people, viral gastroenteritis is a self-limited illness of a few days duration. In severe cases, dehydration and electrolyte imbalance can be potentially fatal, especially in the elderly.

Diagnosis

The best way to detect norovirus is in stool specimens collected when a person has acute illness (within 48 to 72 hours after they get symptoms). However, testing rarely occurs with GI outbreaks in schools. Norovirus is typically identified by common symptoms and epidemiologic data.

Immunity

Most persons' antibody levels against norovirus rise after infection; these titers normally peak by the third week and persist until approximately the sixth week, after which they decline. The nature of resistance and susceptibility to the norovirus is poorly understood, but it is likely that previous exposure to a strain of norovirus provides some immunity against severe disease if re-infected with the same strain.

When to report to Clark County Public Health (CCPH)

Schools are required to report the presence of a contagious disease at the facility to their local health jurisdiction per [Washington Administrative Code \(WAC\) 246-110-020](#). CCPH defines a gastrointestinal outbreak in a school setting as >10% of child/staff population with similar symptoms of vomiting and/or diarrhea or 2 or more children in the same classroom with vomiting and/or diarrhea within 24-hours.

In the event of an outbreak, CCPH will work with the school to determine appropriate response and control based on CDC and Washington Department of Health recommendations. Control measures will be determined on a case-by-case basis in response to that particular outbreak. Control measures should be continued until the outbreak is declared over.



All schools should immediately report suspect and/or confirmed outbreaks of VGE to the CD Program at (360) 397-8182. Immediately report any cases of bloody diarrhea.

Before an Outbreak Occurs

Have policies and procedures in place for:

- Responding to and tracking individual cases of VGE in your school.
- Excluding students/staff with VGE. Refer to the [Infectious Disease Control Guide for School Staff](#).
- Utilizing standard precautions.
- Cleaning and disinfection of surfaces.
- Routine hand hygiene education for students/staff.
- Implementing parent notification system for sending notification letters and FAQ sheets.
- Consulting with CCPH and School Administration about possible closure of food service or the school to stop the cycle of infection in the event of wide-spread occurrence of illness.

During an Outbreak

- Notify your facility licensor or certifier of an outbreak (if you have one).
- Exclude ill children/staff/volunteer(s) with vomiting and/or diarrhea from your school and from working in the kitchen or from handling any food.
- Instruct staff or volunteer(s) that work at other child care facilities to notify that facility of this outbreak.
- Complete the [Gastrointestinal Illness Report Form](#) and fax to CCPH at (360)-397-8080.
- Begin a [line list](#) for tracking number of students/staff with similar GI illness.
- Fax updated line list daily to CCPH with current information on number of reported GI illnesses.
- Distribute a notification letter and [FAQ sheets](#) to all parents/families about groups (e.g. classroom, grade level, and whole school) that were possibly exposed. If you have questions regarding appropriate audiences for distribution of letters and FAQ sheets, please call CCPH Communicable Disease at (360) 397-8182. A notification letter template is available at: <https://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/resources>
- Increase the frequency of routine cleaning. Review the Washington Department of Health [Cleaning for Health in the Classroom Best Practices for Teachers](#) and the [Guidelines for Cleaning, Disinfecting, and Handling Body Fluids in School](#).
- Direct custodial staff to wear masks when cleaning areas that are contaminated by feces or vomitus as splattering or aerosol materials may contain infectious virus particles.
- Clean toys daily and immediately after being soiled with vomitus or stool (see cleaning directions above).
- Discontinue use of water-tables/sensory tables which can easily become contaminated and serve as a source of transmission.
- Ensure hand washing stations are supplied with soap, paper towels, and hands free trash bins.
- Provide education to staff, students and volunteers on the recognition of norovirus symptoms, proper hand washing technique and modes of transmission, throughout the duration of an outbreak.
- Avoid having school functions that serve “family-style” or “self-serve” meals.
- Refrain from putting out bowls of unwrapped foods to share, such as in staff lounge/breakrooms.
- Cancel or postpone field trips and off-site recreational functions until the outbreak is over.
- Provide regular communication with School District Administration and your Public Information Officer regarding the status of the outbreak and the control measures being implemented.

Important Information:

Many custodial programs are not using bleach solutions for routine cleaning. In cases of viral GI CCPH strongly recommends switching to a bleach solution as described in the [‘Clean-up and Disinfection for Norovirus \(“Stomach Bug”\)](#)’ directions. Share information with school administration and custodial staff about switching cleaning solutions to reduce the transmission of illness during GI outbreaks.

After an Outbreak

- Evaluate your school’s response.
- Develop action plans to address any identified areas of concern regarding school’s readiness and response.
- Don’t hesitate to use CCPH as a resource for reviewing outbreak response or supporting training needs.

For additional information visit:

- <https://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/resources> for resources, tools and templates.