



Public Health
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School district talking points for viral gastroenteritis (VGE)

The following talking points may be useful as the basis for letters to parents, for background in talking to the media, and for other written or verbal communications in the event of a viral gastroenteritis outbreak at school:

Overview of viral gastroenteritis

- VGE commonly occurs in schools, retirement communities, cruise ships, college dorms, and other environments where people come into close contact with each other. Norovirus is a common form of VGE.
- VGE symptoms include sudden onset of nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea, headache, body aches, chills, and mild or no fever. Symptoms usually begin within 12-48 hours after exposure. The illness usually resolves on its own within 1-2 days without complications. Most people are still contagious for 48 hours or longer after their last episode of illness (vomiting or diarrhea).
- Dehydration may result after prolonged vomiting and diarrhea, particularly in young children, the elderly, and those with weakened immune systems. Adequate fluid intake should be provided to prevent dehydration. [See attached fact sheet for more details.]

Control measures for parents

- The best way to prevent the spread of VGE is to wash hands regularly and thoroughly, particularly before preparing food, before eating, and after using the toilet. People infected can shed virus in stool up to 2 weeks after symptoms stop, so continued, proper hand washing is essential. Steps in proper hand washing include:
 - Wash hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and warm water.
 - Scrub hands together vigorously for at least 20 seconds, including the front and back of the hands, between fingers, and under the nails.
 - Rinse hands and dry with a paper towel.
 - Turn off the water with a paper towel. Children's hand washing should be supervised by an adult after toilet use.
- When someone in your home is ill with diarrhea and/or vomiting, clean hard surfaces in your home with a solution of ½ cup of household bleach in 1 gallon of water. These include hard surfaces in kitchens, bathrooms, and other surfaces that individuals touch. The solution should be made up fresh daily.
- Vomit or stool on carpets and upholstery should be removed and cleaned with paper towels and steam-cleaned at 160 degrees for 5 minutes. A product such as Lysol or Pine Sol can be used on the fabric for odor control, but will not kill the virus, so should be followed with steam cleaning. Never allow bleach and other cleaners to mix together.

- Always use gloves and a mask when cleaning up vomit and stool and wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.
- If your child is ill with diarrhea or vomiting, please keep him/her at home until s/he is well for 48 hours. This will help to prevent the spread of the illness to others. If the symptoms persist, contact your health care provider.
- If you have questions, call the public health nurse at Clark County Public Health at 360-397-8182.

Control measures for schools

- We are working with Clark County Public Health to control the spread of diarrhea and vomiting among some students and staff. Although we don't yet know the specific cause of the illness, we are following public health guidelines that minimize the transmission of diseases like norovirus as well as some respiratory illnesses. These include:
 - **Tracking the reasons for student and staff absences** to better understand the extent of the health problem.
 - **Encouraging frequent and thorough hand washing** and ensuring that bathrooms and kitchens are stocked adequately with soap and paper towels.
 - **Excluding ill students and staff with vomiting and/or diarrhea from school** for 48 hours or more after their last episode of vomiting or diarrhea to prevent them from spreading the disease to others around them.
 - **Cleaning surfaces thoroughly during outbreaks:**
 - Routinely cleaning kitchens, health rooms, bathrooms and surfaces such as door knobs and drinking water fountains with a solution of ½ a cup of standard, household bleach (5.25% bleach) to 1 gallon of water.
 - Cleaning up vomit or stool on hard surfaces.
 - Cleaning soiled carpets and other cloth surfaces.

Additional information

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/norovirus.htm>