



The Winnebago County Health Department (WCHD) is investigating cases of viral gastroenteritis in a school in our community. Please take a moment to review this important information.

Viral Gastroenteritis Fact Sheet

(Adapted from CDC)

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis outbreaks are common in fall and winter months. Gastroenteritis is an inflammation of the stomach and intestines and is often called the "stomach flu," although it is not caused by the influenza viruses. Noroviruses are the most common cause of gastroenteritis in the United States. It is not caused by bacteria or parasites.

What are the symptoms of illness caused by viral gastroenteritis?

Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal cramps. Sometimes people also have a low-grade fever, chills, headache, body aches and fatigue. One of the more severe manifestations of viral gastroenteritis is dehydration. The onset of illness is usually sudden. The incubation period is generally 12-48 hours and symptoms typically resolve in 1-3 days without treatment. Viral gastroenteritis is highly communicable. Therefore, family members are also at risk of exposure and infection.

How do people become infected with viral gastroenteritis?

Viruses that cause gastroenteritis are found in the stool or vomit of infected people. People can become infected with the virus in several ways, including:

- eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with virus;
- touching surfaces or objects contaminated with virus, and then placing their hand in their mouth;
- having direct contact with another person who is infected

Is viral gastroenteritis contagious?

Yes, and it is important for people to use good hygienic practices. Most children recover from gastrointestinal illness on their own, but to prevent the spread of infection, good hand hygiene should be promoted. Hands should be washed with warm water and soap for a minimum of 20 seconds, especially after using the bathroom and before eating.

In addition, students and staff who are experiencing symptoms of acute gastroenteritis should stay home from school until 24 hours after symptoms have resolved. If your child is ill with vomiting or diarrhea, please consult your physician.

What treatment is available for people with viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis cannot be treated with antibiotics because these medications are only effective at treating bacterial infections, not viral infections. Also, there is no vaccine to prevent infection. Viral gastroenteritis is self-limiting and usually brief in healthy individuals. Infected individuals, especially young children and the elderly, should drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration.

Can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

You can decrease your chance of illness by following these preventive steps:

- Frequently wash your hands
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables, and steam oysters before eating them
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect surfaces that may have been contaminated by infected persons
- Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated

If you have any questions, please contact Winnebago County Health Department's Disease Control Program at (815) 720-4050, or visit the WCHD website at www.wchd.org.