

For Health Professionals

Health Alerts

Health Alert Advisory #113 - Nosocomial Gastrointestinal Illness Outbreak Advisory - November 30, 2004

PURPOSE:

The intention of this advisory is to provide specific guidance to hospitals and long term care facilities for the prevention and control of nosocomial gastrointestinal illness outbreaks. This advisory should be shared with all direct patient caregivers and physicians and posted on patient care units.

BACKGROUND:

There has been a significant increase in the number of nosocomial viral gastrointestinal outbreaks reported across New York over the last month, particularly in the Central New York and Western New York regions. Gastrointestinal outbreaks account for a high percentage of the nosocomial outbreak reports submitted to the NYSDOH each year and often result in significant morbidity to patients and staff. These outbreaks can be disruptive to patient/resident activities, as well as increase staffing shortages. The causative agent of these recent outbreaks has not yet been identified, but is epidemiologically and clinically consistent with Norovirus. Norovirus infection is characterized as a self-limiting illness with clinical symptoms of nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, low-grade fever, or a combination of these symptoms. The symptoms characteristically last 24-48 hours, with an incubation period of 12-48 hours. (MMWR Vol. 50 No. RR-9, "Norwalk-Like Viruses Public Health Consequences and Outbreak Management" www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/rr5009.pdf).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

If your facility is experiencing an increase in gastrointestinal illness, the following control measures should be taken:

1. **Staff Education:** Review control measures to prevent fecal/oral transmission, with an emphasis on hand hygiene and proper use of personal protective equipment as per standard and contact precautions, including wearing a surgical mask when handling vomitus.
2. **Infection Control:** Initiate contact precautions for symptomatic patients who are incontinent of stool for the duration of illness.
3. **Staffing:** Where possible, discourage floating staff of affected units.
4. **New Admissions:** Close affected units to new admissions, where possible. Consider cohorting symptomatic cases.
5. **Patient Activities:** Restrict symptomatic patients to their rooms or unit as much as possible without compromising patient care. Consider temporarily discontinuing group activities. Staff should promote patient/resident hand hygiene.

6. Symptomatic Staff: Survey patient care staff and food handlers for gastrointestinal symptoms and, if symptomatic, exclude from work until symptoms resolve. Consult the local or state health department regarding management of staff infected with agents other than viral.
7. Environmental Aspects: Reinforce frequent cleaning of affected areas. Educate housekeeping staff on proper use of personal protective equipment, including the use of a mask when cleaning vomitus.
8. Specimen Collection: Send three to four stool specimens to your local lab for bacterial pathogen testing, and if clinically consistent, ova and parasites. Viral testing is not necessary in all cases. Consult your NYSDOH Regional Epidemiology office regarding the possible need for submission of specimens to the NYSDOH lab for viral testing. If the outbreak appears to be a point source (i.e., sharp peak of cases with same onset), identify and save common foods for the epidemiological investigation.

Facilities are required to report nosocomial gastrointestinal illness outbreaks to the NYSDOH by faxing a completed Health Care Facility Infection Control Report form (DOH-4018) to (518)474-7381. This form is available on the NYS DOH Web site at: www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/infection/infecontrol.htm.

Follow up will be conducted by the regional epidemiologist in your area:

NYSDOH Regional Epidemiology Offices:

Western Regional Office (716) 847-4503

Central New York Regional Office (315) 477-8166

Capital District Regional Office (518) 408-5396

Metropolitan Area Regional Office (914) 654-7149

Please refer to the NYSDOH's Health Facilities Series Memo, Investigation and Control of Nosocomial Gastroenteritis Outbreaks, available at www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/infection/doh97-4.htm.

If you have additional questions, please don't hesitate to call your Regional Epidemiology office at the number listed above, the DOH Infection Control Program at (518) 474-0925, or the Erie County Department of Health at (716) 858-7697 (Monday - Friday 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM).