



North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Public Affairs

2001 Mail Service Center • Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-2001

Tel 919-733-9190 • Fax 919-733-7447

Beverly Eaves Perdue, Governor

Lanier M. Cansler, Secretary

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Contacts: Carol Schriber, N.C. DHHS Public Affairs Office, 919-733-9190

Protect yourself against norovirus infection

RALEIGH – Recent outbreaks of norovirus – a common and unpleasant gastrointestinal illness – have sickened teenagers at a conference in Raleigh and many other people across the state in long-term care facilities, schools and child care centers, restaurants, and other settings.

Noroviruses are very contagious. The virus is present in the stools and vomit of sick people during illness and for a few days after they recover. People can get sick through direct contact with a person who has the virus, by touching contaminated surfaces, or by eating food or drinking liquids that have been contaminated with the virus. Noroviruses cannot be seen, smelled or tasted in food.

“Noroviruses are tough to kill”, said Dr. Megan Davies, State Epidemiologist. “The most important way to prevent spread is thorough hand-washing using soap and water. Hand sanitizers are not effective against norovirus.”

The symptoms of norovirus illness include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and some stomach cramping. Some people may also have fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and a general sense of tiredness. The illness begins suddenly, and the infected person may feel very sick. In most people, the illness lasts for about 1 or 2 days. However, some – especially young children and the elderly – can quickly get dehydrated and might require medical care or even hospitalization. There are no specific medications to treat norovirus.

What can you do to protect yourself and your family? Follow these simple measures:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water, especially after toilet visits and before preparing, serving or eating food or drink. Hand sanitizer gels are not effective against norovirus.
- Clean up vomit and diarrhea immediately.
- Stay home when sick.
- Do not prepare food when sick and for at least 48 hours afterward.

Many commonly used disinfectants are not effective against norovirus. Cleaning with a dilute bleach solution is recommended to disinfect surfaces after an episode of illness.

For more information about norovirus, see the Division of Public Health Web site at www.ncpublichealth.com. More detailed information about cleanup in private homes and in other settings can be found on the Division of Environmental Health Web site at www.deh.enr.state.nc.us/ehs/dfp_fooddefense-epidemiology.htm.

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