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Norovirus Spreading; Take Precautions to Avoid Illness

Public health officials are urging Helena-area residents to take steps to avoid getting sick from norovirus.

“In the past week, we’ve had reports of 14 lab-confirmed cases of norovirus and 12 hospitalizations,” said Laurel Riek, supervisor of the Lewis and Clark Public Health Licensed Establishment Program. “But we’re aware of almost 60 people in Helena who are showing symptoms.”

Norovirus is very contagious, and it can spread rapidly. It’s sometimes called stomach flu, although it’s not related to influenza. Most outbreaks occur in group settings, like nursing homes, assisted-living facilities, schools, and day-care centers.

Symptoms and Transmission

Norovirus symptoms typically include severe diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, and stomach pain. Other symptoms can include low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, and fatigue. The illness often begins suddenly, and symptoms last from 12 hours to 5 days.

“Norovirus is spread by the fecal-oral route, which means you can get norovirus by accidentally getting tiny particles of diarrhea or vomit from an infected person in your mouth,” Riek said.

The most common ways norovirus spreads is through:

- eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated;
- touching surfaces or objects that are contaminated and then putting your fingers in your mouth; and
- having direct contact with someone who’s infected, by caring for them or sharing food or eating utensils.

It takes only a few norovirus particles to make you very sick.

Studies have shown that you can spread norovirus for two weeks or more, but you’re most contagious when you have symptoms and for the first few days after they go away.
There’s no treatment for norovirus, but those who have it should drink plenty of liquids to keep from getting dehydrated. Symptoms of dehydration include urinating less often, having a dry mouth and throat, and feeling dizzy when standing up. Children who are dehydrated may cry with few or no tears and be unusually sleepy or fussy.

Dehydration can be serious. If you think you or someone you’re caring for is severely dehydrated, call the doctor.

**Steps to Prevent Norovirus**

Here’s how you can help protect yourself from norovirus and reduce its spread in the community:

- Stay home when you’re sick.
- Wash your hands carefully with soap and water, especially after using the bathroom or changing diapers and always before eating or preparing food. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not sufficient.
- Do not prepare food for others while you have symptoms and for three days after you feel better.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces contaminated with vomit or diarrhea. Use a bleach-based household cleaner as directed on the label, or make a bleach solution by adding 5-25 tablespoons of bleach to a gallon of water.
- Promptly and thoroughly wash any clothing or linens that get contaminated with vomit or poop. Wash with detergent on the longest cycle and then machine dry.