Norovirus outbreaks in long-term care facilities

Talking Points
(updated 6/11/13)

Norovirus is a highly contagious cause of vomiting and diarrhea; it is the most common cause of outbreaks of foodborne disease, and it also spreads readily among household contacts, within schools, and among residents and staff within institutional settings such as long-term-care facilities (LTCFs).

When a norovirus outbreak occurs in a LTCF, the staff reports it to the local health department, whose officials then notify state epidemiologists.

Local health department professionals work with LTCF owners and staff to ensure proper control, hygiene and disease reduction procedures during an outbreak. They provide consultation, training and technical assistance to LTCF owners and staff. The goal is to stop the spread of the disease as quickly as possible.

The collaboration between public health officials and long-term care facilities has resulted in increased communication to residents and their families (including notices, signage and calls) during an outbreak.

State public health epidemiologists log norovirus outbreaks throughout the state. They rely upon facilities to report the outbreaks as quickly as possible and to work with local public health officials to control them. Individual cases are always kept confidential, but the state is now releasing outbreak information by facility, most likely on a quarterly basis.

Norovirus comes into a facility from the outside, leaving the staff to deal with it with the help of local public health officials. Facilities that report are helping to protect their patients by reporting outbreaks to local health departments and working with them to implement appropriate control measures.

Sharing information about disease outbreaks (as for restaurants) is a next step in engaging consumers in public health awareness, disease prevention and outbreak control. It is an important step in transparency. Within the limits of state and local funding, local health departments will continue to support LTCFs as a helpful resource in dealing with outbreaks.

The Department of Human Services and the Oregon Health Authority are discussing ways in which the agencies can work together with local health departments to reduce the number of norovirus outbreaks in LTCFs. A task force will convene this summer to get recommendations for moving forward.

People with loved ones in a LTCF should take great care to not visit a facility when ill.
Norovirus is a very common disease; outbreaks should not be used as the only determinate of good care in a LTCF. For more information on how to choose a facility, contact the Department of Human Services Aging and People with Disabilities division: 

NOROVIRUS FACTS

- Norovirus is a viral infection that causes gastroenteritis, which leaves those affected extremely ill, generally for one to two days, with nausea, diarrhea and vomiting.

- Norovirus is very contagious, and typically occurs in colder months. That’s why it’s often referred to as “winter vomiting disease.”

- Children and adults with an acute illness with vomiting or diarrhea should stay home to prevent spreading highly contagious viruses like norovirus to other people.

- There is no vaccine to prevent norovirus infection.

NOROVIRUS PREVENTION

- The chances of transmitting norovirus can be lessened by rigorous attention to hygiene. People should always wash their hands after using the bathroom or changing diapers, as well as before eating, preparing or handling food.

- Alcohol-based hand sanitizers can be used in addition to hand washing, but they do not kill norovirus and some other germs: hand washing is still needed.

- Fruits and vegetables should be washed carefully before preparing and eating them. Cook oysters and other shellfish thoroughly before eating them.

- Noroviruses can survive temperatures as high as 140 degrees and quick steaming processes that are often used for cooking shellfish.

- Ready-to-eat food that might be contaminated with norovirus should be thrown out.

- Sick infants and children should be kept out of areas where food is being handled and prepared.

- No one should prepare food for others for 48 hours after any acute illness with vomiting or diarrhea.