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Contact: Kim Crane, Communicable Disease Supervisor
704-484-5111
Kim.crane@clevelandcounty.com

Sherry Yocum
704-484-3134
Sherry.yocum@clevelandcounty.com

Norovirus Infections Spreading Widely Across North Carolina: State Public Health Officials urge precautions to prevent possible exposure

RALEIGH – Throughout January, several local health departments across North Carolina have reported multiple outbreaks of norovirus, prompting state public health officials to issue advice on steps everyone can take to avoid this common and unpleasant gastrointestinal illness.

“The most important message we have right now is that people who are ill with vomiting or diarrhea should not work, go to school or attend daycare while they are having symptoms,” said State Epidemiologist Dr. Megan Davies. “Everyone needs to wash their hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water. This is the most effective way to protect yourself and others against norovirus since hand sanitizers alone are not as effective against this hardy virus.”

Noroviruses are easily transmitted by touching a contaminated surface as well as by direct contact or by eating food or drinking liquids that have been contaminated with the virus. Noroviruses are notoriously difficult to kill with normal cleaning and disinfecting procedures. Surfaces that have been contaminated with stool or vomit should be cleaned immediately and disinfected with a freshly prepared diluted bleach solution or a bleach-based household cleaner.

Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramping. Some may have fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and a general sense of tiredness. The symptoms can begin suddenly and an infected person may go from feeling well to very sick in a very short period of time. In most people, the illness lasts for about one or two days. People with norovirus illness are contagious from the moment they begin feeling sick until at least three days after they recover. Some people may be contagious for even longer, she added. Infection can be more severe in young children and elderly people. Dehydration can occur rapidly and may require medical treatment or hospitalization.

“Unfortunately, there is no specific medications to treat norovirus, but infected people should drink plenty of liquids to replace fluid lost through vomiting and diarrhea,” Davies said. “The best course of action is prevention.”

Davies offered several simple steps to take if you suspect the presence of a norovirus:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water, especially after toilet visits and before preparing, serving or eating food or drink. Hand sanitizers are not as effective against norovirus.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces contaminated with vomit or diarrhea immediately using a bleach-based household cleaner, or dilute household bleach 1:10 in water (must be mixed fresh daily; never use undiluted bleach).
- Stay home when sick.
- Do not prepare food for other people when sick and for at least three days afterward.

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 at http://epi.publichealth.nc.gov/cd/norovirus/NORO_personal_health.pdf

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