

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Stomach Flu Bug Got You Down?

Coldwater, MI. Suffering from stomach cramps, exhaustion, fever and chills? You got the bug going around. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency is reporting an uptick in “stomach flu” type ailments. Norovirus, a gastro-intestinal illness, may be the culprit. Norovirus causes extreme diarrhea and vomiting. As its name suggests, this disease is caused by a virus. It is highly contagious and known to spread quickly in congregate areas, such as hospitals, nursing homes and schools. Symptoms of Norovirus may include a low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, fatigue, abdominal pain, vomiting and diarrhea. Symptoms onset occur suddenly and begin within the first 24-48 hours of exposure. Often times the virus only lasts a day or two and does not require medical attention for recovery. That’s the good news! There are no vaccines or antibiotics that will help prevent or lessen the severity of this disease.

Norovirus spreads easily. The disease can be transmitted from person to person through direct contact with an infected person. A second way transmission occurs is when an infected person contaminates food or drink during preparation and unknowingly spreads the disease to others. The disease can also be transmitted by contact with infected surfaces (i.e., hand rails, door knobs, phones, etc.) or by breathing in air contaminated with the virus. It’s important to realize that an infected person is contagious from the moment they begin to feel sick until three days after they have recovered. According to Jo Ann Wilczynski, Prevention Services Director at the local Health Department, “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. It’s also important to remember that, if you think you have Norovirus, do not prepare food for others while you are sick and up to three days after.”

Individuals at highest risk for developing complications from Norovirus include infants, the elderly, and those people with underlying chronic diseases (i.e., heart disease, diabetes, COPD, etc.). Due to the diarrhea and vomiting, severe dehydration may take place. Some signs of dehydration are: lack of urine output, dry mouth or throat, dizziness

when standing, sunken eyes, dry skin, rapid heart rate and a lack of tears when crying. Dehydration can occur rapidly with this disease. If dehydration is suspected, seek medical attention immediately. Jo Ann Wilczynski cautions, "Infected people should drink plenty of liquids to replace fluid lost through vomiting and diarrhea." She adds, "The best course of action is prevention."

Preventing the spread of Norovirus is possible by taking the following steps:

- If you are ill with vomiting or diarrhea, do not go to work, school or attend day care until you are symptom free.
- Wash hands often with soap and water, using proper hand washing techniques. (Hand sanitizers alone are not as effective against this hardy virus.) Wash hands often, lathering up with soap for 20 seconds and rinsing with warm water for 10 seconds. Wash your hands after using the toilet.
- Clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces, using bleach based household cleaners or a homemade mixture of ¼ cup of bleach for every gallon of warm water. Surfaces should be cleaned immediately after contact by a sick person.
- Wash laundry thoroughly. It is also important when doing laundry to wear gloves so direct contact with vomit or diarrhea on clothing does not occur. Set your washing machine on the longest cycle available and machine dry when done.
- Wash fruits and vegetables completely and avoid cooking while symptoms are present and for up to three days after.

For more specific information about Norovirus please visit our website at www.bhsj.org and click on the Frequently Asked Question Sheets button.