
Norovirus Outbreaks

Norovirus is the most common cause of gastroenteritis outbreaks in healthcare facilities during the winter season and this year is no exception. Norovirus is highly infectious and spreads quickly from person to person. The virus is found in stool and vomitus of infected individuals.

Individuals infected with norovirus are contagious from the time they begin to feel ill to at least two days following resolution of symptoms. In general, an outbreak of gastroenteritis in a facility is defined as the presence of more cases of diarrhea and or vomiting than usual within the facility or a particular unit in a given period of time. Transmission is by person-to-person contact through aerosol or direct contact with an infected source or through consumption of food contaminated by an infected food worker.

Outbreaks of norovirus are difficult to control due to the transmittable nature of the organism and are very disruptive to hospital and long term care facilities. These outbreaks affect patient, resident and staff safety, resulting in substantial costs and use of resources and, may have significant consequences to patient care services.

Early recognition of an outbreak and swift implementation of control measures are critical to preventing the spread of infection. Good hand hygiene and use of Routine Practices are essential to prevent infections. When using alcohol-based hand rub ensure that it contains between 70-90% alcohol in order for it to be effective against Norovirus. Quick implementation of Additional Precautions and other infection control measures at the onset of gastroenteritis is crucial to prevent the transmission of norovirus.

The microbiology laboratory can assist the Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) team during an outbreak of norovirus by providing fast and accurate laboratory analysis. The laboratory results help guide decisions about the allocation of resources and patient accommodations. Advances in technology have improved laboratory test methodologies and resulted in rapid and timely virology reports that support and enhance the efforts of IPC staff.

In general, good communication and a collaborative working relationship between the Laboratory and IPC personnel is essential to the success of both group in preventing and controlling healthcare associated infections.

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