

2006: a record-breaking year for norovirus in Oregon

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Oregon public health officials investigated a record 119 norovirus outbreaks in 2006, and already this year 13 potential new outbreaks have been reported to the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) Public Health Division.

Investigations into 87 of the outbreaks have been completed; they occurred in 18 counties and affected more than 3,000 people, according to Mel Kohn, M.D., state epidemiologist in ODHS.

The previous year, ODHS investigated 58 norovirus outbreaks in 22 counties that affected 1,455 people, Kohn said.

"By far, noroviruses are the most common cause of foodborne outbreaks," Kohn said. "They make headlines when they affect a nursing home or a cruise ship, but they can happen frequently in the community as well. While norovirus generally doesn't kill, it will give you vomiting and diarrhea for a day or two. It's not fun."

Noroviruses are highly contagious, but their spread can be halted by the simple act of thoroughly washing your hands, Kohn said. He advises these prevention steps:

Wash your hands often, especially after toilet visits and changing diapers, and before eating or preparing food.

Wash fruits and vegetables carefully. Minimize bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food or food that will not be cooked before serving.

Cook oysters thoroughly before eating.

Clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces with a bleach-based household cleaner immediately after an episode of illness.

Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated after an episode of illness. Use hot water and soap.

Dehydration is generally the most serious complication from norovirus infection so it's important to drink water, juice or oral rehydration fluids. This is particularly important for elderly individuals and others for whom dehydration can lead to more serious problems.

Immunity to norovirus tends to be short-lived and there are numerous strains of the virus. This means that becoming infected once doesn't provide much protection against future infections. There is no effective antiviral medication and no vaccine against norovirus.

While norovirus is a primary cause of foodborne outbreaks, it also has been implicated in waterborne outbreaks.

"State and local public health professionals are busy every day protecting our water supplies from this virus and trying to make sure that good hygiene is practiced in the restaurants where we eat," said Kohn. "For the rest of us, the best thing I can recommend is wash your hands, wash your hands."

Kohn noted that federal public health preparedness funds have strengthened the disease detection system, and may be one reason more outbreaks are being identified. Disease monitoring and investigation is one of many public health programs that focus on prevention and helping people manage their health so they can be as productive and healthy as possible.

More information on norovirus can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site.

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