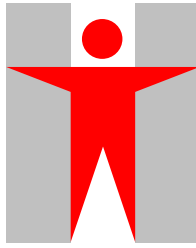


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20 November 2003

Dear Chinese Medicine Practitioner,

Viral gastroenteritis outbreaks associated with Norovirus

Recently there has been an increase in institutional outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis (GE) caused by Norovirus (or Norwalk-like virus). Norovirus is a common cause of viral gastroenteritis in Hong Kong. It tends to be more active towards winter months. Outbreaks in institutions are not uncommonly seen: in 2001, there were 39 outbreaks involving 678 persons; in 2002, there were 39 outbreaks involving 892 persons; and in 2003, from January to October, there were 36 outbreaks involving 731 persons.

So far this month, nine viral gastroenteritis outbreaks in institutions have been brought to the attention of the Department of Health (DH). Five have been laboratory-confirmed as outbreaks of Norwalk-like viral gastroenteritis.

Besides conducting epidemiological investigations and implementing control measures, DH has issued letters to schools, kindergartens, child care centers and elderly homes alerting them of the coming high season for Norovirus and take appropriate measures.

Norovirus has high infectivity and can cause secondary spread among household members in a family. To prevent Norovirus-associated viral gastroenteritis, please kindly advise your patients to observe strict personal, food and environmental hygiene with particular attention on handling of vomitus and faecal matter by the following measures:

We are committed to providing quality client-oriented services

- Wash hands thoroughly before handling food and eating and after going to toilets and handling vomitus or faecal matter.
- Wear gloves while disposing of vomitus and faeces, and wash hands afterwards.
- Clean and disinfect soiled linens, clothes and surfaces promptly and thoroughly with diluted household bleach (1:49).
- Staff and school children developing vomiting or diarrhoea should refrain from work or school, and seek medical advice.

Please refer to the enclosed fact sheet on Norovirus for your reference. Information is also available at the website of DH at www.info.gov.hk/dh/diseases/info.htm#cd.

If you encounter increase in number of clients with symptoms of viral gastroenteritis coming from the same institution, please inform us as early as possible through the telephone hotline, 2961 8966, set up by DH to provide health advice and information on how to prevent the disease. The DH will start our epidemiological investigations and take appropriate control measures. The sick staff or children should be advised to take sick leave from school until recovery. The hotline will operate during office hours daily until further notice.

Yours sincerely,

(Dr Ronald LAM)
for Director of Health

Fact Sheet on Norovirus Infection

The virus

Noroviruses (genus *Norovirus*, family *Caliciviridae*), are a group of related RNA viruses that cause acute gastroenteritis in humans. Norovirus was recently approved as the official genus name for the group of viruses provisionally described as “Norwalk-like viruses” (NLV). It has been implicated as the most common etiological agent of non-bacterial gastroenteritis outbreaks. Noroviruses are relatively resistant and are able to survive freezing and temperature as high as 60°C.

Mode of transmission

Noroviruses are transmitted primarily through the fecal-oral route, either by consumption of fecally contaminated food or water or by direct person-to-person spread. Environmental and fomite contamination may also act as a source of infection. Evidences also suggest transmission due to aerosolization of vomitus.

Incubation period

The incubation period is usually 24 to 48 hours.

Clinical features

The infection usually presents as acute onset of nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and diarrhea. Vomiting is relatively more prevalent among children, whereas a greater proportion of adults experience diarrhea. Constitutional symptoms including headache, fever, chills, and myalgia are frequently reported. The disease is self-limited and the gastrointestinal symptoms usually last for 1 to 3 days with no long-term sequelae. Dehydration may occur in young children and elderly with chronic debilitating conditions. There is no long-term immunity and re-infection is possible.

Clinical Management

No specific antiviral therapy is available. Supportive treatment such as rehydration should be given especially in children and elderly.

Department of Health

18 November 2003