

# Guidelines for Acute Gastroenteritis Outbreaks in Schools and Healthy Populations

These guidelines are intended for outbreaks that are person-to-person and determined NOT to be foodborne

## **Define the outbreak:**

Case Definition: Multiple episodes of diarrhea and/or multiple episodes of vomiting within a 24-hour period.

Outbreak Definition: Onset of three or more cases from separate households that are epidemiologically linked (i.e., in the same classroom, attended the same event, etc.) within in a 24-hour period.

## **When you have an outbreak:**

1. Begin a line listing of ill persons. [https://oeps.wv.gov/toolkits/documents/agi-norovirus/agi\\_norovirus-ll-general.pdf](https://oeps.wv.gov/toolkits/documents/agi-norovirus/agi_norovirus-ll-general.pdf)
  - Complete for the duration of the outbreak until you have no new cases for double the incubation period of the suspected illness.
  - Use the line listing to track the progress of the outbreak and to adjust your control measures.
  - For a school outbreak, if cases spread to more than two classrooms, consider monitoring absentee rates rather than individual cases until rates return to normal.
2. Consider notifying parents and guardians. A sample letter is provided in this toolkit (see below).
3. Implement appropriate control measures (see below).
4. Report the outbreak to your local health department and stay in touch throughout the outbreak.
5. Collect specimens.
  - Discuss the need for testing with your local health department or the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau for Public Health, Office of Epidemiology and Prevention Services, Division of Infectious Disease Epidemiology (DIDE).
  - If you collect specimens, DIDE recommends collecting three to five stool specimens from recently ill persons:  
Specimen Submission Form: [https://dhhr.wv.gov/ols/labs/Documents/Micro/Test%20Request%20Form\\_Micro\\_UPDATED-10Feb2022.pdf](https://dhhr.wv.gov/ols/labs/Documents/Micro/Test%20Request%20Form_Micro_UPDATED-10Feb2022.pdf)  
Specimen Collection Instructions: [https://dhhr.wv.gov/ols/labs/Documents/Micro/STOOL%20SPECIMEN%20COLLECTION%20INSTRUCTIONS\\_Enterics.pdf](https://dhhr.wv.gov/ols/labs/Documents/Micro/STOOL%20SPECIMEN%20COLLECTION%20INSTRUCTIONS_Enterics.pdf)

## **To help control the spread of infection:**

1. Practice good hand hygiene. Promote adherence among faculty and staff, as well as parents and guardians at home.
  - Wash hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water.
  - Ensure individuals wash hands before eating or drinking, after going to the bathroom, or after contact with an ill person.
2. Wear appropriate personal protective equipment (gloves, face shield, gown, etc.) when cleaning up vomit or diarrhea.
3. Increase the frequency of cleaning/disinfection of potentially contaminated areas and high touch surfaces with the following method:
  - Clean surfaces with a detergent to remove particulate debris, followed by the application of a bleach solution for disinfection.
  - Use a chlorine bleach solution with a concentration of 1000-5000ppm (1:10 dilution of household bleach).
  - For more information: <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-g-antimicrobial-products-registered-epa-claims-against-norovirus-feline#products>.
4. Do not return to work or school until 48-72 hours after symptoms resolve, and practice good hand hygiene after returning.

**REMEMBER: Outbreaks are immediately reportable to your local health department.  
For further questions or information, contact the Division of Infectious Disease Epidemiology.**

## Sample Letter for Parents

Dear Parents/Guardians:

This letter is to inform you of an increased number of students reporting gastrointestinal illness at <School Name>. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), typical presentations of a gastrointestinal illness include vomiting and diarrhea and can be transmitted easily by:

- Having direct contact with an infected person
- Sharing food or eating utensils with an infected person
- Consuming contaminated food or water
- Touching contaminated surfaces then putting unwashed hands in your mouth

In a collective effort to stop the spread of illness, we are requesting that you:

- Know the signs of gastrointestinal illness: Look for any symptoms of diarrhea, vomiting, fever (over 100.4° F), or stomach cramps.
- Keep sick children at home: Students should stay home for at least 48 hours after the last episode of vomiting or diarrhea without medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil), or Imodium. Consider seeking medical care if your child's illness is not improving on its own.
- Properly report your child's absence to the school: When reporting the absence, be sure to advise what your child's symptoms are so the school can keep track of the potential spread of the illness.
- Cleaning: Use bleach when cleaning. Bleach is the best chemical to kill these germs. Consider cleaning high traffic areas such as countertops, doorknobs, and tables. When mixing a bleach solution for cleaning it should be diluted, 1-part bleach to 10 parts water. Apply the diluted bleach mixture and allow the bleach to dry for four minutes. Clothes soiled with vomit or diarrhea should also be cleaned with bleach or color safe bleach.
- Teach your child to wash their hands thoroughly: Hand washing with soap and water is the best way to clean hands. Encourage your child to wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. (Tip: Sing the Happy Birthday Song TWICE.)

Our school works closely with the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources' Division of Infectious Disease Epidemiology to monitor and stop outbreaks of illness. Contact the school nurse with any questions. We will notify you with any changes in our school's plan to prevent illnesses.

Sincerely,

[School administrator's name and signature]