

Information for Parents/Guardians

Gastrointestinal Outbreaks



Region of Waterloo
PUBLIC HEALTH AND
EMERGENCY SERVICES

Gastrointestinal illness and outbreaks at child care centres are very common during the fall and winter months. This fact sheet is designed to help you better understand an outbreak.

What is an outbreak?

Outbreaks occur at a child care centre when the number of staff and children who are experiencing the same symptom(s) is more than expected during a 24 hour period. Outbreaks of gastrointestinal illness can result in serious medical complications and lost days at child care centre, and work among staff and children. The two most common viruses that are responsible for gastrointestinal outbreaks are Norovirus and Rotavirus. The symptoms of gastrointestinal illness may include diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain/cramps, fever and headaches. The illness can be spread very easily among children and staff at child care centres through person-to-person contact, or through contact with contaminated food, water and environmental surfaces.

The role of Public Health Inspectors during an outbreak

Public Health Inspectors investigate, monitor and declare outbreaks at child care centres. They provide recommendations on cleaning, disinfecting, infection prevention and control, food handling, and admission standards to help manage and control the outbreak.

The role of parents/guardians during an outbreak

The child care centre relies on parents to report illness, submit stool samples and keep unwell children home until they have recovered. Parent/guardian co-operation during an outbreak is essential to prevent the spread of illness.

The three key points to prevent the spread of illness includes:

- Hand washing
- Environmental cleaning and disinfection
- Monitoring and exclusion of unwell children

Hand washing

Hand washing is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of gastrointestinal illness. Hands should be washed with soap and warm running water, lathering for **at least 15 seconds**, rinsing well, and then drying with a clean towel. A separate clean towel for the unwell child is recommended. The towel should be changed daily to reduce the spread of infection. When access to running water is limited and if hands are not visibly dirty, alcohol-based hand sanitizer (containing at least 62–70% ethyl alcohol) used under supervision, is an appropriate alternative for hand washing.

Parents should encourage and assist children to wash hands:

- Whenever they are visibly soiled
- After using the toilet
- After having a diaper changed
- Before and after eating or handling food
- After petting animals or handling their waste

Environmental cleaning and disinfecting

Effective cleaning is an important first step to remove dirt and germs. Disinfecting reduces the number of harmful germs to safe levels and is only effective if surfaces are cleaned first.

Important items to clean and disinfect include:

- All bathroom fixtures including sink handles, flush lever and toilet seats
- Frequently touched surfaces such as hand and stair railings light switches, door handles, refrigerator handles, remote controls, phones and keyboards
- All toys. Soft toys can be laundered. Hard toys can be washed and * disinfectant in the sink or dishwasher
- Soiled bedding and clothing. Avoid shaking soiled laundry as this may spread germs into the environment

***Bleach solution effective against Norovirus**

To make a 1000 ppm bleach solution using 5.25% sodium hypochlorite bleach, mix 2 teaspoons bleach with 2 cups water. A 10 minute standing time or contact time is required. Always follow manufacturer's instructions for product use.

Monitoring and exclusion of unwell children

If your child is unwell:

- Promptly report symptoms of gastrointestinal illness to staff at the child care centre
- Keep children experiencing gastrointestinal symptoms at home until they are 48 hours symptom free; this will help prevent the spread of illness
- Do not send children to an alternative public child care centre
- Use a stool kit to collect stool samples from symptomatic children; kits can be provided by the child care centre, public health or your family physician
- Seek medical attention for children who are experiencing severe or prolonged symptoms

If you have any other questions speak with staff at the child care centre, or contact Region of Waterloo Public Health, Health Protection and Investigation at 519-575-4400 (TTY: 519-575-4608).

Alternate formats of this document are available upon request.

Region of Waterloo Public Health and Emergency Services

Health Protection and Investigation

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