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Date: March 26, 2024

To: Oak Park Community Members

From: Oak Park Department of Public Health

Subject: Gastrointestinal Illness Outbreaks Update

Local Cases

Health officials identified two significant gastrointestinal illness outbreaks in our community during February:

- At a local school between February 8th and 13th, 142 students reported symptoms meeting the case definition of vomiting and/or diarrhea (3 or more loose stools in a 24-hour period), with no other apparent cause.
- At a long-term care facility (LTCF) between February 18th and 24th, 16 people fell ill exhibiting symptoms meeting the case definition of vomiting and/or diarrhea, with no other apparent cause.
- While none of these met the case definition determined for the school and LTCF, throughout February there were at least 11 additional community members who reported similar symptoms of vomiting and/or diarrhea with no other apparent cause. These cases were not associated with the two known outbreaks after reviewing their food logs and other potential associations. Several parents also reported children in other schools and daycares in the community with symptoms, but these reports were not associated with any known outbreaks.

Fortunately, none of these cases required hospitalization.

Confirming the Cause

To definitively diagnose norovirus, testing of clinical specimens (such as stool samples) are required. Unfortunately, although some affected individuals sought medical attention, no specimens were reported to health officials for laboratory confirmation. If we had been informed by those whose symptoms met the case definition and if they had submitted specimens for testing, we could have definitively confirmed or ruled out norovirus as the cause. Without this community participation, we were unable to determine the precise diagnosis.

In the absence of laboratory confirmation, health officials based their response on the symptoms and outbreak settings, which strongly indicated norovirus as the most likely cause. Factors supporting the suspicion of norovirus include:

- The mean illness duration of 12-60 hours.
- The mean incubation period of 24-48 hours.
- More than 50% of cases experiencing vomiting.

Response

In response to the outbreaks, health officials took the following actions:

- Conducted inspections of the kitchens at the affected facilities, interviewed food handlers, and ensured proper food handling, storage, and serving techniques were followed.
- Provided guidance to facility staff on proper cleaning and disinfecting procedures.
- Disseminated information on mitigation approaches to lessen person-to-person spread of norovirus and secondary cases and exposures.
- Closely monitored and remained in contact with staff regarding new cases.
- Reached out to individuals affected by symptoms matching the case definition for each outbreak.
- Sent out messages to the public through our website and social media requesting they contact us with information regarding:
 - Any potential unreported cases or clusters occurring simultaneously.
 - Identifying if a common source could be linked across the outbreaks and other cases.



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Seasonal Trends

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is reporting an uptick in norovirus cases across the United States this winter season. Norovirus, often called the "stomach flu" or "stomach bug," is a highly contagious virus that causes acute gastroenteritis, characterized by nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal cramps. However, it is unrelated to influenza. Norovirus spreads remarkably easily through close person-to-person contact, consumption of contaminated food or water, or contact with contaminated surfaces. While norovirus outbreaks typically surge during the winter months each year, this season's levels remain within the expected range as pandemic precautions have been relaxed over the past couple of years. Nevertheless, these outbreaks underscore the continued importance of taking appropriate precautions to prevent transmission.

Protecting Yourself

Throughout the norovirus season, take extra care with these tips:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds.
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Cook oysters and shellfish thoroughly to an internal temperature of at least 145°F or higher.
- Stay home and avoid preparing food if you have nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea.
- Do not return to work/school until symptom-free for 24 hours without medication.

Most recover within 12-72 hours, but frequent handwashing is crucial during and after illness, as you may continue shedding the virus. By following these precautions, we can help reduce the spread of gastrointestinal illnesses and protect our community's health. Contact your healthcare provider if your symptoms persist or worsen.