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Bracing for 'stomach bugs'

Viruses peak in the coldest months in hospitals and nursing homes.

By Tim Darragh, OF THE MORNING CALL

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Infectious disease specialists call them noroviruses that cause "non-clostridium difficile acute gastroenteritis."

We call them "stomach bugs" that send you scurrying to the bathroom.

Hospitals and nursing homes call them dangerous germs that can sicken, and even kill, patients and residents. With the calendar turning to the coldest months of the year, hospitals and nursing homes are hunkering down as they face the peak season for virus outbreaks in their facilities.

The numbers bear out the reason for concern. In the first three months of this year, nursing homes in Pennsylvania reported 4,040 norovirus cases — nearly twice as many as those reported in all the nine prior months combined. The data, reported this month by the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority, also found hospital infections peaked in the first quarter of the year, although not as dramatically as in nursing homes.

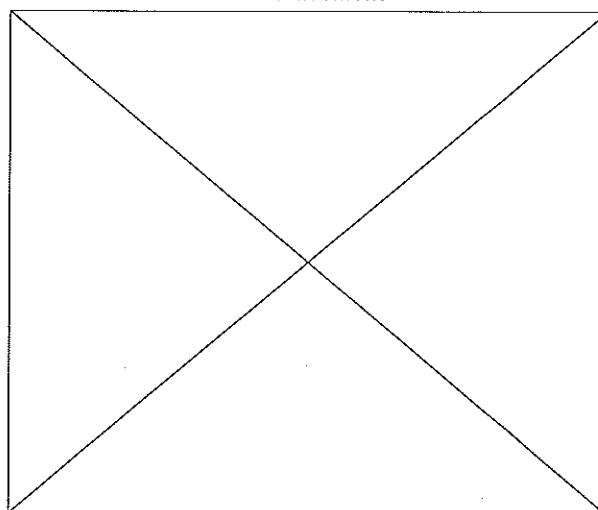
Officials at the authority also found that outbreaks in nursing homes were more extensive than in hospitals. On average, it found, six people were sickened in hospital outbreaks. Nursing homes reported an average of 25 cases per outbreak, it said.

Part of the reason, said Bill Marella, authority program director, is that while nursing homes are considered health care facilities, they also are residents' long-term living quarters. "People are in closer proximity and interacting more in nursing homes than in hospitals," Marella said.

Hospitals can segregate sick patients into single or double rooms relatively easily, he said. "That's much harder to do in a nursing home, because this is where people live."

At the same time, nursing home workers know their residents, so they can tell when they're not well, said Kay Weiss, director of nursing at Valley Manor Nursing and Rehabilitation home in Coopersburg. When residents are sick, she said, staffers do everything they can to minimize contact with others to prevent the spread of germs. For instance, if a resident needs physical therapy, staff will bring the therapist to the resident's room, rather than have the workout take place in a public room, she said.

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Still, norovirus outbreaks have been a concern in the winter in health care facilities. The problem worsened after 2005 and 2006, when two new strains of the virus emerged, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "The viruses are constantly changing, mutating and adapting," Marella said. "We don't have the immunity to those new strains."

Noroviruses are spread when a person ingests something contaminated with tiny bits of infectious fecal matter. That's often caused by individuals who fail to wash their hands thoroughly and then handle food or utensils, but it also can be spread by touching surfaces such as doorknobs, countertops or keyboards or drinking contaminated water. Contaminated people who visit patients and residents can spread the germs just as easily as workers, the health care representatives said.

Not only is the virus easily transmitted, but it's also difficult to eliminate. According to the authority's report, noroviruses can survive temperatures as low as freezing and as high as 160 degrees. They have a long "shelf life" and are resistant to many disinfectants.

Only tiny amounts of the norovirus are needed to infect an individual, and no antiviral medication exists for the germs, said Dr. Luther Rhodes, chief of the Infectious Diseases Division at Lehigh Valley Health Network.

That's why health care facilities should have workers taking extra care to wipe down surfaces and wash their hands diligently now. They also have explicit policies to halt the spread of germs, as well as plans to deal with viruses once they're detected. Additionally, they are required to report infectious disease outbreaks to state health authorities.

Like other health care facilities, Good Shepherd Rehabilitation Network tells sick workers to stay home until they are well, and they have to receive clearance before they can return, said Michael Kistler, director of infection prevention. Good Shepherd even monitors hand-washing rates by its caregivers, he said, saying his department provides "education and guidance, based on vigilance."

At Lehigh Valley Hospital, housekeeping staff uses a "high-test version" of the regular cleaning agent when noroviruses are suspected, Rhodes said.

Because health care facilities will require infectious workers to stay at home, making sure the germs are under control is good health care and good business, Rhodes said. A health care unit that is hard-hit with norovirus contamination will be shut down, affecting other units, and then requires state Health Department approval to reopen, he said.

That's major impact for a germ that, while nasty in its own right, is not as life-threatening as infectious diseases caused by salmonella or e. coli contamination.

Illness from a norovirus usually cause two or three days of "significant inconvenience," Rhodes said, "but if you're 85 and have a bad heart, that condition is more serious.

"It s not a minor nuisance."

Preparing for norovirus season

Educate staff, patients, residents and visitors about virus transmission. Focus on hand-washing.

Implement plans to clinically identify possible cases rapidly.

Provide sufficient supplies of personal protection equipment such as single-use equipment and toileting supplies.

Designate a communications leader with a plan for rapid dissemination of information about the location and extent of an infection and steps for dealing with it.

Exclude ill staff members for at least 48 hours after symptoms pass. Exclude non-essential staff and volunteers from working in areas experiencing outbreaks.

Source: Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority

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