

本署檔號 Our Ref. : (215) in DH CDB/8/19/1
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9 January 2025

Dear Principals / Persons-in-charge,

Vigilance against acute gastroenteritis (AGE)

I would like to draw your attention to the recent upsurge of AGE activity and enlist your support in the prevention of the disease.

The surveillance data of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health showed a significant increase in the number of patients attending Accident and Emergency Departments with AGE symptoms and residents in sentinel residential care homes for the elderly with vomiting. The number of AGE outbreaks increased sharply from seven recorded in the week ending 28 December last year to 19 in the week ending 4 January, with some patient samples tested positive for norovirus in laboratory testing. It is expected that norovirus activity will remain at a high level during the winter season and the risk of related outbreaks in schools will increase with the resumption of classes after the holidays. Management of schools are urged to maintain strict personal and environmental hygiene to prevent the spread of AGE.

AGE is usually caused by norovirus or rotavirus infection. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, fever and malaise. These viruses can be transmitted by consumption of contaminated food, contact with the vomitus or excreta of the infected persons, contaminated objects, and aerosol spread with contaminated droplets of splashed vomitus. They are highly infectious and may result in outbreaks that are difficult to control. AGE outbreaks may occur throughout the year although they are relatively more common in winter months.

To prevent AGE outbreaks, strict personal, food and environmental hygiene, with particular attention to handling of vomitus and faecal matter, is very important. Alcohol-based handrub should not substitute hand hygiene with liquid soap and water, as alcohol does not effectively kill some viruses frequently causing AGE (e.g. norovirus). We would like to recommend schools to take the following steps:

1. Remind children/students and staff to maintain personal hygiene. Wash hand with liquid soap and water, and rub for at least 20 seconds before meals and after going to the toilet. Then rinse with water and dry with a disposable paper towel or hand dryer.
2. Remind children/students and staff and their family to maintain proper food hygiene. Ensure all food is adequately cooked especially high-risk food like



shellfish.

3. Train staff on the proper management and disinfection of the environment after vomiting/diarrhoea incidents:
 - Cleaning and disinfection should be carried out immediately.
 - Keep children/students away from the area during the cleaning process.
 - Wear gloves and a surgical mask throughout the disinfection procedure.
 - Discard all food if vomiting and diarrhoea occurs in an area where open food is displayed.
 - Remove the bulky waste cautiously from all soiled linens and clothing, soak them in 1 in 49 diluted household bleach (mixing 1 part of 5.25% bleach with 49 parts of water) for 30 minutes and then wash thoroughly. If immediate washing cannot be arranged, place the soiled linens and clothing inside sealed bags and wash them as soon as possible.
 - Use absorbent disposable towels to wipe away all the vomitus/ faecal spillage from outside inward. Then apply 1 in 49 diluted household bleach (mixing 1 part of 5.25% bleach with 49 parts of water) to the contaminated surface and the adjacent areas liberally (as a rough guide, preferably disinfect areas within 2 metres from the edge of the vomitus/ faecal spillage), especially the frequently touched surfaces e.g. door knobs, hand rail, etc. Leave for 15 – 30 minutes to allow time for the bleach to inactivate viruses. Then rinse with water and keep dry.
 - Ensure the household bleach used has not expired. For effective disinfection, diluted bleach should be used within 24 hours after preparation as effectiveness would decrease with time if left unused.
 - As undiluted bleach liberates a toxic gas when exposed to sunlight, it should be stored in a cool and shaded place out of reach of children.
 - Never use floor mops for cleaning up the vomitus.
 - Soak all cleaning tools in 1:49 diluted household bleach (mixing 1 part of 5.25% bleach with 49 parts of water) for 30 minutes and then rinse thoroughly and air dry before reuse.
 - Wash hands thoroughly afterwards.
4. Keep the mouthpiece and protective guard of drinking fountains free from contamination with oral and respiratory secretions. Advise staff/students/children on the following when using drinking fountains:
 - Children using the fountain should not come in direct contact with the orifice guard.
 - Young children are discouraged from drinking directly from the drinking fountain. Individual drinking cups should be used.
 - When individual disposable cups are supplied by schools, there shall be a suitable container for the unused cups and also a receptacle with cover for disposing of the used cups.
 - Expectorating upon the drinking fountain is prohibited.
 - Do not use water dispensers to wash hands/ personal items.
 - Water dispensers should be regularly cleaned and properly maintained.
5. Maintain good indoor ventilation.
6. Maintain proper function of sanitary facilities and drainage system. Clean and disinfect toilets after use by infected persons.
7. Sick staff, especially the food-handlers, should take sick leave to prevent the spread of disease.

8. Keep affected children and staff away from schools/centres until their diarrhoea or vomiting has subsided for at least 2 days or as advised by the doctor.

As schools, daycare and residential institutions are at risk of communicable disease outbreak, I would urge you to keep vigilance against communicable diseases. The "***Guidelines on Prevention of Communicable Diseases in Schools / Kindergartens / Kindergartens-cum-Child Care Centres / Child Care Centres***" contains practical information and control measures on prevention of communicable diseases and is available at: <http://www.chp.gov.hk/en/content/9/460/24522.html>.

If you notice an increase in number of staff/students/children with symptoms of AGE, please inform the Central Notification Office of the CHP as early as possible (Fax: 2477 2770; Tel: 2477 2772; Email: diseases@dh.gov.hk) so that prompt investigation and control measures can be initiated accordingly.

Thank you for your unfailing support in prevention and control of communicable diseases.

Yours faithfully,



(Dr Albert AU)

for Controller, Centre for Health Protection
Department of Health