

NEWS RELEASE:



December 12, 2002

Schools latest casualty of fast-moving virus

Parents warned of contagious Norwalk bug

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At least six Toronto schools have been hit by the Norwalk virus, prompting the public school board to send letters to parents warning them to keep their children at home if they show any signs of the highly contagious pathogen.

The absentee rate is about the same as it was at this time last year, said public school board spokesperson Jennifer MacIntyre.

Schools that have reported children with diarrhea or vomiting have had extra cleaning, she added.

The emergency department at Toronto General Hospital remained closed yesterday. On Tuesday, about 18 hours after the hospital surrendered to the rampant Norwalk virus, Dr. Michael Gardam was ruining lunch for the medical residents.

As they munched on salad and lasagna, he described rapid-onset diarrhea, projectile vomiting and the probability that before the outbreak is over, they, too, will probably know the agony of Norwalk.

"Assume everything you touch down there (in the emergency department) is crawling with Norwalk virus, because it probably is," he warned them. "Get in and get out. Wash your hands on the way in and wash them when you leave. And don't touch anything you don't need to."

In the face of an outbreak that has so far hit eight Greater Toronto hospitals, Toronto General is getting tough with the bug, using the two substances it can't survive: soap and water.

Every couple of hours, housekeeping descends on the ER, where every surface is scoured with Virox. No one is allowed in or out of the emergency department without a squirt of alcohol-based cleanser. Nurses, doctors and specialists are being reminded of the most basic preventative health principle: Wash your hands.

"It's pretty low-tech, but that's the reality," said Gardam, the hospital's director of infection control.

Like most GTA hospitals, Toronto General saw sporadic cases of Norwalk over the past couple of weeks as patients made miserable from the virus, which lasts 24 to 48 hours, dragged themselves to the emergency room.

But that created a perfect climate for the bug - riding on microscopic droplets of vomit, saliva or feces - to hop from one patient to another and into staff.

"Wave after wave of patients were coming in, 10 to 12 patients a day, and were getting violently ill in the emergency room," Gardam said. "Despite our best efforts, it's so contagious that people will eventually catch it."

By last Sunday, the hospital was so short-staffed it was becoming impossible to care for patients.

"We had to close. We couldn't, in good conscience, stay open," Gardam said.

Since November, Norwalk has hit Sunnybrook hospital, Mississauga's Credit Valley Hospital, Richmond Hill's York Central, The Scarborough Hospital, and the Etobicoke and Brampton campuses of the William Osler Health Centre.

Toronto Public Health reports there are at least 50 outbreaks in the city.

For now, no new patients are being admitted into Toronto General's emergency ward, where 10 patients are confined until the outbreak is over. They were receiving treatment when the ER closed and can't be transferred to another bed for fear of spreading the virus.

Toronto Western and Mount Sinai hospitals were taking emergency patients who would otherwise go to Toronto General, and Emergency Medical Services said ambulances were coping with the loss of an emergency room.

The emergency room won't reopen until two days after the last symptom disappears in the last Norwalk patient.

"We're thrilled that it hasn't been worse than it is," Gardam said. "Norwalk is usually just a nuisance and then it goes away, but this year it's gone beyond the nuisance stage."