

Gastrointestinal Illness Cluster

Infection Control Recommendations for Homelessness Service Settings

Gastrointestinal illness (e.g., frequent episodes of vomiting and/or diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea) spreads directly or indirectly from person to person. An ill person can easily contaminate food, surfaces, or objects with vomit/diarrhea. Some common gastrointestinal illnesses (e.g., norovirus) are very contagious and can spread through your site quickly if infection prevention and control measures are not in place. If you or your staff notice an increase in gastrointestinal illness, here are some things that you can do to help protect your clients and staff:

Hand Hygiene

- Ensure liquid hand soap and alcohol-based hand rub (also known as ABHR or hand sanitizer) dispensers are checked regularly and kept full
- Educate clients and staff on proper hand hygiene
- Encourage regular hand hygiene and consider offering supervised hand hygiene for clients (e.g., have a staff member pump alcohol-based hand rub into client's hands as they enter the dining area)
- Ensure that the alcohol-based hand rub used on site has an alcohol content between 70%-90%
- Provide portable alcohol-based hand rub to staff, if possible
- Put up [Hand Washing](#) and [Hand Sanitizer](#) posters in your site

Environmental Cleaning & Personal Protective Equipment

- Increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting at your site, especially for:
 - high-touch surfaces (e.g., door knobs, light switches),
 - common areas (e.g., dining rooms, sleeping quarters, bathrooms), and
 - shared equipment (e.g., telephones, computer keyboard, coffee machines)
- Use a disinfectant (e.g., bleach, hydrogen peroxide enhanced action formulation) that kills norovirus
- Maintain an adequate and accessible supply of:
 - personal protective equipment (e.g., gloves, gowns masks),
 - liquid hand soap,
 - alcohol-based hand rub, and
 - cleaning/disinfectant products
- Review the [Cleaning up Blood and Body Fluids](#) tool for instructions on how to clean up vomit and diarrhea
- Educate staff on proper glove use:
 - Staff should only use gloves based on their risk assessment of exposure to germs on their hands or as directed to on the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) for cleaning/disinfecting products
 - Review the [Putting on and Taking off Gloves](#) tool for instructions on proper glove use
- Perform hand hygiene before putting on and after taking off personal protective equipment (e.g., gloves)
- Wear gloves (and a gown if splashing is possible) when handling items contaminated with vomit/diarrhea
- Wear appropriate personal protective equipment (e.g., gloves, gown), when removing and/or bagging clothing/linen that has been contaminated with vomit or diarrhea. Wash the items with detergent and hot water and dry on the highest heat setting
- For settings with children, increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting of toys and play areas/equipment. Review the [Toy Cleaning and Disinfecting](#) tool for instructions on how to properly clean and disinfect toys

Client Control Measures

- Encourage ill clients to seek healthcare
- Do not allow ill clients to prepare or serve food for others
- Encourage separation between clients that are sick and well, if possible. For example:
 - Have all ill clients use one bathroom and restrict clients that are not ill from using that bathroom;
 - Place ill clients in a bedroom or resting area that is separate/distant from well clients
- Provide ill clients with leak-proof bags to contain vomit. Ensure that the bag is securely tied and thrown away after use
- Consider restricting or cancelling of group activities
- For settings with children, do not allow children who are ill to participate in group water or sensory play activities

Staff (including students and volunteers) Control Measures

- Ask ill staff to stay home from work until at least 48 hours after their symptoms end
- Do not allow ill staff to prepare or serve food for others
- Consider restricting or cancelling group activities
- Inform staff of increase in illness and provide just-in-time training (e.g., review the points in this tip sheet)
- Ensure that there is at least two metres between yourself and someone who is vomiting, if possible

Communication

- Inform clients of increase in illness. Post information in a location that clients frequent, if possible
- Inform agency partners (e.g., healthcare, external laundry services) of increase in illness
- If calling first responders (e.g., EMS) to the site, inform them that the site is experiencing an increase in illness and provide illness symptoms

Notify Toronto Public Health Control of Infectious Diseases and Infection Control program (416-338-8563) if there is a significant change in the severity of illness, hospitalizations, or deaths related to this cluster.

For more information, refer to the [Infection Prevention and Control Resources for Homelessness Service Settings](#) webpage.