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HEALTH OFFICIALS STRESS IMPORTANCE OF CAREFUL HANDWASHING, FOOD PREPARATION IN BATTLING NOROVIRUS

BUTTE COUNTY, Calif. — Winter is the peak time of year for norovirus, an illness that is also referred to as the “winter vomiting bug” or “stomach flu”. Butte County Public Health Department has received several reports of increased incidence of gastrointestinal illness in local hospitals, clinics, and long term care facilities. One outbreak in a skilled nursing facility has now been confirmed as norovirus.

Norovirus outbreaks tend to peak during the winter months. Symptoms of a norovirus infection can include vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, headache, body aches, and sometimes fever. People typically become ill 24 to 48 hours after exposure to the virus, and symptoms usually last one to two days.

Noroviruses are present in the stool and vomit of infected people. They are spread primarily through person-to-person contact, or contamination of food prepared by a person who is currently ill or has been recently ill and didn't wash their hands appropriately.

The key to preventing norovirus is simple, officials say. Just practice good personal hygiene, observe appropriate food-handling procedures and stay home if you are ill.

"The main thing people need to do is wash their hands frequently," said Dr. Mark Lundberg, Health Officer with Butte County Public Health. "Wash your hands – thoroughly and carefully with soap and water – after using the toilet, before consuming food, and before preparing food for yourself or others. Good hand hygiene could prevent a majority of the illness caused by these viruses."

Part of the difficulty in combating norovirus, Lundberg said, is that people confuse it with other things. The general public often refers to this type of illness as the "stomach flu". This term causes much confusion, because norovirus is a completely different virus than influenza and causes a different illness. Influenza is primarily a respiratory illness, characterized by symptoms like high fever, body aches, sneezing, a runny nose or a sore throat. Norovirus is a gastrointestinal illness and can be passed on to others through food, as well as through contaminated surfaces and direct contact.

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Moreover, while influenza can be prevented with a vaccine, there is no vaccine for norovirus, leaving good hand washing as the primary defense. Precautions that can help prevent the spread of noroviruses include:

- Wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet or changing diapers.
- Wash your hands before preparing or eating food or beverages.
- Don't prepare food if you have diarrhea and/or vomiting, or for 48 hours after symptoms go away.
- Promptly clean and disinfect any contaminated surfaces with a bleach-based household cleaner.
- Stay home if you are ill, and for 24 - 48 hours after symptoms go away.

There is no specific drug to treat people with norovirus illness. People who are ill should stay home, rest, and drink plenty of fluids to replace those lost through vomiting and diarrhea. Norovirus usually gets better within 1-2 days. If symptoms do not go away after 2 days, a health care provider should be consulted. People should also remember that they can continue to spread the virus for up to several days after they get over a norovirus infection, Lundberg emphasized.

People who are ill do not need to call the health department unless they are reporting an outbreak (multiple persons ill who do not reside in the same household). The public can report suspected outbreaks (not individual cases) of norovirus illness to Butte County Public Health by calling 538-7581 in Oroville or 891-2372 in Chico. More information about norovirus is available from the Butte County Public Health web site at www.buttecounty.net/publichealth.

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Butte County Public Health Department

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