



# LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

1930 Ninth Avenue  
Helena, MT 59601  
PH: 406.4HEALTH or 406.443.2584  
Fax: 406.457.8990

## NEWS RELEASE

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### Confirmed Cases of Norovirus in the Helena Area

CONTACT: Laurel Riek, Environmental Health Specialist, 447-8361, [lriek@co.lewis-clark.mt.us](mailto:lriek@co.lewis-clark.mt.us)

**HELENA** – Five cases of norovirus have been confirmed in the Helena area this week. Norovirus, also commonly called the “stomach flu,” is in our community and causing illnesses in Lewis and Clark County, so residents need to take precautions to protect themselves from this highly contagious virus that causes nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

The symptoms of norovirus can last from 12 hours to five days. The time from when a person is exposed to the virus until they begin getting sick is approximately 12-48 hours. The virus is shed in stool and vomit and people can continue to shed the virus for several days after symptoms have disappeared.

A person is exposed when they get the virus in their mouth from food, water, or other things that are put into the mouth such as hands, toys, pacifiers, utensils, and cigarettes. Contaminated hands spreads norovirus if a person is shedding the virus and does not wash their hands well after using the bathroom. In addition, a person may also be exposed if they contact the virus while it is in the air contained in droplets. These infective droplets get into the air during episodes of vomiting, or from a toilet being flushed after an ill or recently ill person uses it. These droplets then land on surfaces including; sinks, tables, counters, toys, door handles, light switches, and faucets creating easy opportunities for exposure.

Norovirus is *very* contagious. According to Laurel Riek, Environmental Health Specialist at the Health Department, “Eighty-five percent of people who are exposed to norovirus will become sick. Norovirus disease is usually not serious, although people may feel very sick. Most people get better within one or two days, and they have no long-term health effects.” The very young, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems are more likely to experience complications, such as dehydration, that can lead to severe illness or death.

**People who suspect they have norovirus can protect their friends, co-workers and community from this virus by doing one simple thing: Staying home.** People who work in jobs such as food service, caregivers at daycares, and healthcare workers need to stay home while they have symptoms of the illness *and* for an extra two to three days after the symptoms disappear. It is very easy for people in these occupations to unintentionally spread the virus.

You can protect yourself and your family from contracting these viruses through good sanitary procedures.

- Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly and frequently, especially before eating or otherwise touching your mouth and after using the restroom. Be aware that instant hand sanitizers don't protect you from this virus.
- Disinfect surfaces with a chlorine bleach solution. Rinse off with clean water.
  - 5 TBS per gallon of water for food/mouth contact items
  - 1/3 cup bleach per gallon of water for non-porous surfaces
  - 1 and 2/3 cup bleach per gallon for porous surfaces (e.g. wooden floors)
- Immediately launder any soiled clothes or bedding.

“The single most important thing you can do to protect yourself against norovirus is to wash your hands with soap and water. Please stay home if you are sick,” Riek advises.

The health department continues surveillance of the outbreak. For more information, call Laurel Riek at 447-8361.

*The Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department's mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis & Clark County residents.*

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