

MEDIA RELEASE

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Gastroenteritis outbreak in Nelson: Public health advice

Six patients at Nelson Hospital are currently in isolation with gastroenteritis and tests are being conducted by the ESR to determine the exact cause.

Hospital Operations Manager and Associate Director of Nursing Linda Ryan says that robust infection prevention practice is in place at the hospital to help prevent the spread of gastroenteritis to patients, staff and visitors, but that the community has an important role to play also.

“It’s really important not to visit people in hospital if you have diarrhoea or vomiting, and for up to 48 hours after those symptoms cease. We are managing the outbreak and are otherwise fully functional but have that important message for our community.”

Medical Officer of Health Dr Andrew Lindsay says that people should also avoid visiting rest homes and early childhood education centres (ECEs) if they have symptoms.

Children with symptoms should be kept home from schools and ECEs, and adults should stay away from their workplace, while they are sick and for 48 hours after their last vomiting or diarrhoea episode.

“Gastroenteritis is highly infectious, very easily spread from person to person and people are contagious for up to 48 hours after symptoms have ceased. Very young and older people are especially vulnerable,” Dr Lindsay says.

“Regular and thorough hand washing, with lots of soap of hot water, is very important to prevent the spread.”

Rest homes and ECEs in the Nelson and Tasman region have been advised by the Nelson Marlborough Public Health Service to be alert to symptoms and how to help prevent outbreaks.

Know the symptoms

The symptoms of gastroenteritis are:

- nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea
- stomach cramps, headache and low-grade fever
- chills and muscle aches

Looking after yourself, and others, at home

Most people with gastroenteritis can treat themselves at home, and help prevent other family members catching it by following good hygiene. Staying at home also helps prevent the spread in the community.

There is no specific treatment for gastroenteritis. Dehydration is the main cause of illness; to prevent this:

- drink plenty of plain water and oral rehydration drinks that can be bought from pharmacies and some supermarkets

- don't take medicines to stop vomiting or diarrhoea (unless prescribed by a doctor) as these will stop your body from getting rid of the gastroenteritis virus

To prevent spreading gastroenteritis to other people:

- isolate yourself or the sick person you are looking after; put them in their own room and prevent others from entering unless necessary
- if you are at a campsite or other public place, consider going home to recover. You can be infectious for up to 48 hours after symptoms cease.
- stay away from other people until well and for 48 hours after the last episode of vomiting or diarrhoea
- avoid preparing food for others if possible
- cook all food thoroughly
- wash hands thoroughly after using the toilet, before preparing food and before eating
- wash and dry your hands well using soap and water and, ideally, follow this with hand sanitiser
- avoid vomiting in sinks or shared basins/surfaces. The toilet is the best place.
- clean up vomit or excretia using gloves (if available), detergent and hot water followed by bleach (household bleach diluted 1part bleach to 10 parts water), or a bleach-based disinfectant
- immediately remove and wash any contaminated clothes and bedding using detergent and hot water
- prepare for gastroenteritis when you pack for a holiday or travel: paper towels, soap and hand sanitiser. Consider packing a small bottle of bleach
- report the illness to campground or DOC staff if relevant

When to see a doctor

People are advised to see a doctor if they, or a family member:

- has blood in their vomit
- gets any new or worse symptoms
- has vomiting or diarrhoea for longer than three days
- becomes badly dehydrated. Signs of dehydration include:
 - little or no urine passed in the last 8 hours and the urine is dark and smelly
 - reduced saliva in their mouth, no tears, sunken eyes, sunken fontanelle in infants
 - dizziness, lethargy (no energy), floppiness, a rapid heart rate and breathing, cool hands and feet or grey cold skin
 - their skin doesn't relax after being pinched.

Call Healthline 0800 611 116 if you are unsure what you should do

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