

Seasonal Viral Infections Common in Schools

Information for Schools

In Canada, some viral infections increase during the winter season, typically between October and April and can affect people of all ages. These viral infections can cause respiratory illness or viral gastroenteritis. While not usually serious, viral infections can be spread to others. In schools, it is common to have periods of illness and absenteeism that may peak at various times during the season.

Seasonal respiratory illness

Seasonal respiratory illness is a viral infection that can be caused by the influenza virus (the flu) or other cold and respiratory viruses. Symptoms of respiratory illness develop a few days after inhalation of a virus. The most common symptoms of an influenza-like infection are fever, chills, coughing, sneezing, sore throat, general aches, headache, and fatigue. Similar symptoms may also occur for the common cold.

Viral respiratory infections can spread directly from person to person through respiratory droplets from an infected person when they cough or sneeze. It is also spread indirectly by unwashed hands or droplets that contaminate surfaces, such as toys, eating utensils, and other commonly high-touched surfaces such as door handles, computer key boards and telephones.

Most people recover from respiratory illnesses within a short period of time. Other individuals who have weakened immune systems or other underlying chronic illnesses may have a more severe illness and their symptoms may last longer. People should seek medical attention if they are concerned or if the illness appears to be worsening or the symptoms become more severe.



Seasonal viral gastroenteritis (enteric illness)

Seasonal viral gastroenteritis is a viral infection most commonly caused by norovirus or rotavirus. Rotavirus is the most common cause of diarrhea in children. Symptoms of viral gastroenteritis develop a few days after ingestion of the virus.

The most common symptoms of norovirus infection include a sudden onset of vomiting, watery diarrhea, cramps, headache, and fever. Vomiting is more common among children. Diarrhea is more common among adults. Most healthy people recover within 24-60 hours.

The most common symptoms of rotavirus infection include diarrhea, vomiting and abdominal pain. Most healthy people recover within 3-8 days. Occasionally, children less than two years of age may develop severe diarrhea leading to hospitalization.

For viral gastroenteritis, people who have weakened immune systems or underlying chronic illness may have a more severe illness and their symptoms may last longer.

People should seek medical attention for illness if they are concerned, if illness is lasting longer than a few days, or if the symptoms are severe or worsening.

Viral gastroenteritis infections can spread directly from person to person through contact with hands of an infected person if their hands are not washed properly after using the toilet. It is also spread by eating food or drinking water that has been contaminated by the virus.

Tips to prevent seasonal viral infections:

Schools can:

- Promote and teach good hand washing practices within the school.
 - Hand washing is important before eating, after using the toilet, after coughing or sneezing, and when hands are soiled.
 - Equip washrooms with liquid soap and paper towels for handwashing.
- Promote and teach good respiratory etiquette, including covering a cough and/or a sneeze, by coughing or sneezing into a sleeve or a tissue.
 - Promote disposing of a soiled tissue after use and washing hands or using hand sanitizer afterwards.
- Enhance the cleaning and disinfection practices within the school. Focus efforts on the frequently touched surfaces such as door handles, bathroom taps, and shared toys/equipment.
- Encourage staff to get their yearly influenza immunization.
- Encourage staff to stay home when ill.

Parents can:

- Encourage good hand washing practices.
- Encourage good respiratory etiquette, including covering your cough and sneeze.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces such as door handles, bathroom taps, computer keyboard/mouse, and television remotes.
- Have children get their yearly influenza immunization, and get it themselves.
- Keep children home when ill.
- Avoid sharing personal items such as eating/drinking utensils, toothbrushes, and towels, especially with ill persons in the home.

Questions?

If you have any further questions, talk to your Public Health Inspector or contact Public Health at 519-575-4400.

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Region of Waterloo Public Health

Health Protection and Investigation