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8 January 2014

Dear Principal / Person-in-charge,

Vigilance against acute gastroenteritis

I would like to draw your attention to the prevention of acute gastroenteritis in your institution / organization as we are entering into the traditional peak season of the disease.

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) recorded 5 institutional outbreaks of acute gastroenteritis in week ending 4 January 2014 as compared with one outbreak each in the past three weeks (8 - 28 December 2013). The communicable diseases surveillance system based at the Accident & Emergency Departments of public hospitals showed an increasing trend in consultation rate of the acute gastroenteritis syndrome group. The consultation rate increased from 121.8 (per 1000 cases) in the week ending 28 December 2013 to 127.7 (per 1000 cases) in the week ending 4 January 2014. Besides, the sentinel surveillance system based at childcare centres and kindergartens (CCC/KG) also showed a recent increase in the activity of diarrhoea. The percentage of CCC/KG with children affected by diarrhoea increased from 10.9 in the week ending 29 November 2013 to 16.1 in the week ending 20 December 2013. Meanwhile a gradual increase in AGE activity is observed for the weekly consultation rates of acute diarrhoeal diseases (ADD) based at sentinel General Out-patient Clinics (GOPCs). From the week ending 30 November 2013 to 4 January 2014, the consultation rate of ADD based at sentinel GOPCs increased from 2.2 to 3.8 (per 1000 consultations).



Acute gastroenteritis is usually caused by norovirus or rotavirus infection. It is highly contagious and can be transmitted by consumption of contaminated food, contact with the vomitus or excreta of the infected persons, contaminated objects and aerosol spread with contaminated droplets of splashed vomitus. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, fever and malaise. Although infections are usually mild and self-limiting, they are highly infectious and may result in outbreaks that are difficult to control. It is a frequent cause of outbreaks in institutions. Such outbreaks may occur throughout the year but are known to occur more frequently in winter months.

To prevent outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis, strict personal, food and environmental hygiene with particular attention to handling of vomitus and faecal matter are very important. I would recommend you to take the following steps:

1. Remind children/students and staff to maintain personal hygiene especially proper hand-washing with liquid soap before meals and after going to the toilet;
2. Remind children/students and staff and their family to maintain proper food hygiene. Ensure all food is adequately cooked especially high-risk food like shellfish;
3. Train staff on the proper management and disinfection of the environment after vomiting incidents:
 - Keep children/students away from the area during the cleaning process;
 - Wear gloves and mask while cleaning the vomitus;
 - Use disposable towels (do not use floor mops) to wipe away all the vomitus from the periphery inward, before applying 1 in 49 diluted household bleach (by adding 1 part of household bleach containing 5.25% sodium hypochlorite to 49 parts of water) to the surface and neighbouring area (say within two metres of the vomitus);
 - Leave for about 30 minutes to allow the bleach to inactivate viruses in the vomitus before rinsing the surface with water, and then leave it dry;
 - Wash hands thoroughly afterwards;
 - Maintain good indoor ventilation.
4. Keep the mouthpiece and protective guard of drinking fountains free from contamination with oral and respiratory secretions. Advise staff/students/children on the following when using drinking fountains:
 - Avoid contact with the mouthpiece and protective guard of the drinking fountain when drinking directly from it;
 - Young children should preferably use a container to collect water from the fountain for drinking, and not drink directly from the fountain;

- People who are suffering from gastroenteritis or other infectious diseases should avoid drinking directly from drinking fountains;
 - Do not contaminate the drinking fountain, for example, using it for vomiting or washing hands.
5. Advise staff/students/children who present with vomiting or diarrhoea to refrain from work/school and seek medical advice.

As schools, daycare and residential institutions are at risk of communicable disease outbreak, I would urge you to keep vigilance against communicable diseases. The ***“Guidelines on Prevention of Communicable Diseases in Schools / Kindergartens / Kindergartens-cum-Child Care Centres / Child Care Centres”*** contains practical information and control measures on prevention of communicable diseases and is available at: <http://www.chp.gov.hk/en/content/9/460/24522.html>.

If you notice an increase in number of staff/students/children with symptoms of viral gastroenteritis, please inform the Central Notification Office of CHP as early as possible at Fax: 2477 2770 or Tel: 2477 2772 so that investigation and control measures can be initiated as soon as possible.

Yours faithfully,



(Dr SK CHUANG)

for Controller, Centre for Health Protection
Department of Health