



## A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

### *Wash Your Hands – Don't Share Germs!*

*Norovirus Outbreak in an Elementary School — District of Columbia, February 2007*

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*[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.*

**[Matthew Reynolds]** Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds. Health officials learned about an outbreak of gastroenteritis, a flu-like illness, in a Washington D.C. elementary school. During the first week of February 2007, about one in four students and teachers became ill with symptoms that included nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Generally, this type of illness is spread by person-to-person contact, however, in this outbreak, they found that contact with shared computer equipment contributed to the spread of the illness. Norovirus was the cause for this outbreak and is known to cause most acute gastroenteritis outbreaks in the U.S.

Dr. Shua Chai is an Epidemic Intelligence Service Officer with the CDC and is working in Washington D.C. with the District of Columbia's Health Department. Dr. Chai is joining us by phone to discuss this norovirus outbreak. Dr. Chai, welcome to the show.

**[Dr. Chai]** Thank you very much for having me.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** First Dr. Chai, tell our listeners what the term norovirus means and what it is?

**[Dr. Chai]** Norovirus is really a highly infectious virus that's the most common cause of nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea outbreaks in the United States. Once infected, norovirus usually takes about a day or two to develop symptoms and these symptoms include nausea and vomiting, watery diarrhea, stomach cramps, and sometimes a low fever. Symptoms can last from one to three days and really, people can become dehydrated with this type of infection.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** Well the symptoms that you just mentioned, symptoms like nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, they're pretty common, especially in the winter months. So, is norovirus a kind of flu or is this different than the flu?

**[Dr. Chai]** Well, when people have a bout of nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, they often refer to it as the stomach flu. But the stomach flu is actually not the flu at all, but is actually caused, most of the time, by the norovirus, which is this highly contagious virus that's spread person-to-person and from eating or drinking something contaminated or touching a contaminated surface. However, the cause of seasonal flu, the one you get a vaccination for each year, is actually caused by the influenza virus - a totally different

virus. The seasonal flu is spread by breathing in particles from someone's sneeze or cough and you tend to get other things, such as fever, cough, congested nose, and body aches. So norovirus is actually a different virus, although it is sometimes called stomach flu.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** Well, we'll talk about that - those symptoms and prevention - in a few minutes, but I want to turn our attention to this outbreak. In Washington, D.C., how did that health department first learn about the students and teachers that became ill at the school?

**[Dr. Chai]** Well, one of the best things that we have out there are these school nurses. Various school nurses at this elementary school called the D.C. Department of Health and told us there was really a larger than normal number of students and teachers who had become ill with nausea, vomiting, and Diarrhea, so that's how we first learned about it.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** How do you make the determination when you get a call like that if you're dealing with an outbreak, instead of or rather than a few people who are just becoming ill around the same time? What's the connection?

**[Dr. Chai]** Well, usually when somebody has called us, it's at a point where there's some concern. The criteria we usually use is anything that is beyond expected, and usually with norovirus, because it is so contagious, so many people have become ill by the point, they -somebody has contacted the Department of Health.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** How do you treat someone who's come down with norovirus illness?

**[Dr. Chai]** Norovirus is actually not treatable as a virus, but what we do is called supportive care. In others words, making sure folks keep hydrated. And also, the other part is also to keep people who are ill away from people who are not ill to prevent the transmission of this illness.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** Well, let's talk about that a little bit more because you mentioned a couple of times that this is a contagious disease. It spreads very quickly and easily, especially in groups, I would think, that are in close contact with each other. What do you recommend for preventing or reducing the spread of norovirus?

**[Dr. Chai]** Well, there are three things that are very important that we especially found through this outbreak investigation of norovirus at this elementary school. First and foremost, it's always very important for any disease to wash your hands very thoroughly and frequently with soap and water; that's the number one way to prevent the spread of disease. The second thing that we found, especially in this outbreak of norovirus, was that ill persons really should stay at home for a day to three days after symptoms resolve. That's not since symptoms begin, but actually after symptoms resolve, cause people can continue to be infectious during that period of time. The third, which was the

main thrust of this investigation, was that shared services and objects, including those not commonly cleaned, such as computer keyboards and mice, should be thoroughly disinfected with dilute bleach during outbreaks of norovirus.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** Where can our listeners get more information about the norovirus?

**[Dr. Chai]** Well, we really want people to educate themselves about norovirus and their own health and one great way to do this is to go to the CDC website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). On the website, they should search for norovirus, spelled N-O-R-O-V-I-R-U-S for additional information.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** Dr. Chai, thanks for sharing this information with us today.

**[Dr. Chai]** Thank you for having me.

**[Matthew Reynolds]** That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

*{Announcer} To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*