

The Importance of Being Earnestly Clean

Were some friends and family missing from your holiday festivities due to “the stomach bug”? If so, they were not alone in their misery. The City of Boston and surrounding towns are currently experiencing numerous outbreaks of gastroenteritis. The Boston Public Health Commission’s (BPHC) Surveillance System has shown an increase in GI presentation in emergency department visits. Over the past two weeks, an increase in the number of patients seeking treatment for nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea has been observed across all emergency departments in Boston.

It is a common misunderstanding that “stomach bugs” are a food-borne illness, usually suspecting the last food they ate as the culprit. I sometimes get those calls at the board of health office. Even if I cannot figure out the cause of the illness, I send the information, such as what the person ate for the previous 72 hours, along to the Department of Public Health so that they have the opportunity to look for a common denominator.

The norovirus was at one time called Norwalk virus after it caused an outbreak of illnesses in Norwalk, Ohio in the 1970’s. The viruses are second only to the common cold in the occurrence of viral illnesses in the US. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that an estimated 181,000 cases of Norwalk or Norwalk-like infection occur annually in the United States.

Interestingly, (Well, I find it interesting.) humans are the only hosts of these viruses. This is especially important information to comprehend when we realize that the illness is carried in human fecal material. That means we can’t blame it on fecal contamination from animals. People become ill one or two days after contact with human fecal material. I know this probably conjures up gross images but, in fact, people don’t even know this is happening. Viruses are even smaller than bacteria, so they won’t even be visible on someone’s hands when they don’t wash sufficiently enough to remove all the contamination. What happens next, you wonder? Well, “it”, the viral contamination, eventually makes it into someone’s mouth when they eat or when they pass it on to food they prepare. Then, the food simply becomes the vehicle for the little “bugs”. This is called fecal-oral contamination.

It could, I suppose, also be called vomitus-oral contamination, for the vomit also contains the virus and this virus is fairly hardy, and all too happy to live on surfaces such as door and faucet handles. In this case, it isn’t the touching of the infected handle that causes the problem, of course. It is what we do with our hands after touching the infected handle. If we then eat or put our hand over our mouth, say to cough, or we lick our finger to turn a page, then we are placing the virus into the beginning of our digestive tract and it is off and running. Actually, avoiding touching your nose, mouth and eyes is one very important way to keep yourself from putting germs inside your body. Nose pickers get sick more often than nose blowers. It’s true. And now you know why.

In order to avoid infection in a public restroom, or anywhere people have been ill, wash your hands scrupulously, including under the nails. Washing to the timing of the alphabet or birthday song works well. And oh, wouldn’t my fastidious father praise me if only he could see me give as advice that which I thought was embarrassing as a girl: Use a paper towel to turn off the faucet. People don’t realize they are re-contaminating their hands when using a clean hand to turn off the faucet which someone

else invisibly contaminated. Then, use the same paper towel to open the bathroom door. For those times when soap and water may not be available, carry a small bottle of hand sanitizer with you. Taking these added precautions, as silly or overboard as some of them may seem, can greatly reduce the spread of this very uncomfortable viral infection.

Finally, keep in mind that you can shed the norovirus for several days after symptoms have stopped. So, if you work with a vulnerable population such as a day care or nursing home or if you are a food handler, it is important to stay home for that time period.

This hand washing campaign, if you all participated and passed along the knowledge (insist on it!) and the example, could prove to be the most important and powerful public health campaign in history, preventing the spread of flu, colds, viruses and saving many thousands of lives. This would prove the importance of being earnestly clean, indeed.