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NEWS RELEASE



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Summer Brings Tourists and Health Messages

Potential for Norovirus encourages agency coordination and lots of handwashing

(Juneau) — With many cruise ships expected in Alaska communities throughout the summer, as well as thousands of other tourists arriving in Alaska by plane and automobile, the potential is high that we will see cases of Norovirus and other infectious diseases this summer. Norovirus may be found at low levels throughout the year in some communities, however, the massive movement of people during the summer season makes it more likely to spread rapidly throughout the state.

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, is coordinating with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other local, state and federal agencies to help ensure our communities are safe and healthy. State Public Health Nurses are available in most communities to advise local business owners and tourism industry workers on the proper precautions to take to help prevent the spread of infectious diseases like Norovirus. The state also coordinates with the U.S. Coast Guard, the State Emergency Coordination Center, Alaska State Troopers, in addition to local health care facilities and emergency workers in case additional assistance is needed caring for or transporting sick individuals to health care facilities.

“Good hand washing is the most important step for every individual in protecting themselves and others against Norovirus and other infectious diseases,” said DHSS Public Health Director Jay Butler, M.D. “I encourage every individual to wash their hands properly, thoroughly and frequently.”

Norovirus prevention information is available for download from the Division of Public Health Epidemiology Web site at <http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/id/dod/norovirus.stm>. The site contains a fact sheet, poster, and information about sanitizing for public or business owners.

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause gastroenteritis, sometimes referred to as the “stomach flu.” Norovirus is a common cause of gastrointestinal illness worldwide. The most common symptoms are nausea with vomiting, diarrhea, and cramps. These symptoms occur in all age groups although diarrhea is more common among adults and vomiting is more common in children. Many persons also experience headache, fever, chills and muscle aches. The symptoms may appear from 12-72 hours after exposure to the virus, but usually within 24 to 48 hours.

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Noroviruses are predominately spread from person-to-person. Noroviruses are also easily spread by eating food or drinking water contaminated with feces from an infected person. Some medical reports suggest that the virus can spread through the air during vomiting. Less common food-associated outbreaks have been linked to cold prepared, ready to eat foods (e.g., salads, coleslaw, sandwiches) and shellfish harvested in contaminated water. Some outbreaks have also been associated with drinking water and recreational water (e.g., swimming ponds, and beaches).

There is no treatment for Norovirus. Most people recover in two to three days after they become ill. Supportive treatment to prevent dehydration may be needed in severe cases.

Thorough hand washing following toilet use and prior to handling food is the best way to prevent the spread of these viruses. If you're in a place where you can't wash your hands, using a hand sanitizer is recommended. Persons currently ill with diarrhea or vomiting should not handle food, work in day care centers or care for patients in a health care facility until these symptoms have stopped.

Additional information on Norovirus can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/norovirus.htm>.

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