

# Gastrointestinal Illness

## in Long-Term Care Facilities

These checklists are provided by Wake County Health and Human Services Communicable Disease Program. They are intended for use during a suspected outbreak of acute gastrointestinal (GI) illness at your facility. The intent is to provide guidance on implementing measures to stop the outbreak. Implementing these measures also helps identify the cause and collect data on the outbreak to prevent future outbreaks and inform disease burden estimates. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns regarding diarrheal/ vomiting illnesses at your facility.

*This document is adapted from the 2024-2025 Norovirus: Information for long-term care facilities with permission from the Minnesota Department of Health (January 2025).*

### Who we are and what we do

The Wake County Communicable Disease Program is responsible for investigating, tracking and controlling:

- Communicable diseases and conditions required to be reported by NC law (N.C. Administrative Code rule 10A NCAC 41A .0101)
- Disease outbreaks

This include illnesses caused by a variety of pathogens like *salmonella*, *C. difficile*, *E. coli*, *shigella* and *norovirus*. *Norovirus* is a common cause of acute GI illness outbreaks in long term care facilities. We are here to help with outbreaks at your facility, including answering questions and determining the best strategies for outbreak control. We will also document the outbreak to better understand disease burden and trends.

### When to report a suspected outbreak

North Carolina state law requires reporting of specific illnesses that could have a significant impact on public health. This includes suspected outbreaks, increases in GI illnesses, or unusual disease activity at your facility. Here are some examples of when to report:

- **Illnesses above established baseline.** Determine what the baseline incidence of GI illness in your facility is. Report to Wake County when the number of illnesses rises above your baseline (e.g., look at your routine resident illness tracking to establish a baseline of diarrheal/vomiting in the facility).
- **Multiple cases**
- **More staff than usual calling in sick with symptoms of GI illness**





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### How to report

**Call: 919-250-4462 or Fax: 919-743-4905 to report cases or suspected cases of communicable diseases to Wake County Health & Human Services Communicable Disease Program.**

- **Non-urgent reports:** Non-urgent reports can be made outside of normal business hours, on weekends or holidays by leaving a message on the Communicable Disease Line: 919-250-4462. Please provide a contact name and number for the CD Nurse to call you back the following business day. This number is checked during weekends and holidays at 9 a.m., 1 p.m. and 5 p.m.
- **Urgent reports:** Should you need to alert us of an immediate public health threat, specifically as it relates to suspicion or confirmation of the conditions or events noted below, the Emergency CD Line: 919-250-1217, will be answered immediately or will return your call within 15 minutes.
  - Novel and/or highly infectious diseases (*measles, mumps, Ebola, Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome*)
  - Biologic toxins, hazardous chemicals or mass casualties

### Prevention Tools

- **Hand hygiene**
  - Train staff on proper hand hygiene.
  - Make sure staff and resident handwashing facilities are stocked with soap and paper towels.
  - Do not use hand sanitizer as an alternative to handwashing.
- **Clean/disinfect**
  - Check labels on cleaning products to ensure they are effective against pathogens that cause GI illnesses, like norovirus. You can check with your chemical supplier or check the EPA's website.
  - Clean up vomiting or diarrheal incidents immediately using appropriate PPE. Do not use a vacuum.
  - Always use best practices for cleaning/disinfecting, washing linens, etc.
- **Person movement**
  - When possible, do not transfer patients into or out of the facility while they have vomiting or diarrhea.
  - Visitors with vomiting or diarrhea should not visit the facility while ill.
  - Staff and volunteers should stay home from work if ill with vomiting or diarrhea.
  - Inform EMS and hospital when sending patients with symptoms of GI illness.
- **Quickly identify an outbreak**
  - Keep track of staff and volunteer illnesses.
  - Know what your normal or baseline level of diarrhea and vomiting is in your facility.
  - Call Wake County and initiate outbreak response when more residents and/or staff are ill.



# Gastrointestinal Illness Checklist

Use this checklist for outbreak response

## Report

- Report the possible outbreak when you detect an increase in gastrointestinal illnesses above the expected baseline or normal rate (e.g., more illness than usual in the facility).
  - Call the Wake County Communicable Disease nurse assigned to your facility or 919-250-4462.
- The nurse will ask the following information:
  - What date did the earliest illness start? When did the other illnesses occur?
  - How many residents do you have in the facility? How many have been ill?
  - How many staff do you have in the facility? How many have been ill?
  - What symptoms did ill individuals have? What is the approximate duration of illness?
  - Have the ill individuals been in one unit or wing, or spread across the facility?
  - Have any dietary or food staff been ill?

## Document

- Start a LINE LIST. Contact managers of each unit, etc. as necessary to gather illness info.
- Send LINE LIST back to the communicable disease nurse within 24 hours of reporting the suspected outbreak. It's okay if it's not complete, send updates as illness increases. You will be asked to send a complete one at the end of the outbreak.
- Gather additional information
  - List activities, events, etc. held during the week prior to the first illness (especially if food was served).
  - Determine when and where there were any vomiting incidents or diarrheal accidents in the facility.
  - If requested, provide a dietary menu and/or names/phone numbers of staff and/or residents.
- Collect a stool sample from two (2) residents and/or staff. If you send stools from residents or staff to a clinical laboratory, notify the communicable disease nurse of any results.
  - With the approval of NC Department of Public Health, Wake County can provide stool specimen collection kits to be processed by the state lab.
- Send the completed LINE LIST to the communicable disease nurse after the last illness.



## Implement Outbreak Control Measures

### Residents

- Monitor for resident illness (record on the LINE LIST). Isolate residents while they are ill and for 48 hours after the last episode of diarrhea or vomiting.
- Restrict new admissions and transfers until the outbreak has ended.
- Cancel group activities until the outbreak has ended.

### Staff

- Monitor for staff illness (record on the LINE LIST) and staff/volunteers should stay home until 48 hours after their vomiting and diarrhea has ended.
- Assure proper handwashing and glove use.
  - Educate residents, staff and visitors on proper technique.
  - Promote proper glove use followed by handwashing. Hands should be washed before patient contact, food prep, snacks/meals, after patient contact and bathroom visits.
  - Traditional alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not effective against common gastrointestinal pathogens. Wash hands with soap and water to remove pathogens.
- Staff assigned to work with patients with GI symptoms should only work with those patients. Staff assigned to work with asymptomatic patients should only work with those patients.

### Visitors

- Limit visitors during the outbreak, as they can spread illness in the facility or become ill themselves.
- Post signs to promote visitor hand hygiene, particularly after visiting ill residents.
- Visitors with vomiting and/or diarrhea or other symptoms of illness should not visit the facility while they are ill.

## Clean

- Immediately clean/disinfect the facility. Focus on frequently touched surfaces and objects (e.g. bathrooms, door handles, counters, tables, water fountains, etc.).
  - Clean all surfaces with soap and water. Rinse.
  - Disinfect all surfaces with a disinfectant that is effective against pathogens that cause GI illness, like norovirus. See Norovirus Fact Sheet and Cleaning Disinfection.
  
- Clean/disinfect at least daily until the outbreak is over.
  
- Clean up vomiting or diarrheal incidents immediately.
  - Use appropriate procedures to prevent those doing the cleaning from getting sick.
  - Consider having a staff member who has been ill and recovered during the outbreak do the cleaning.
  - Never use a vacuum to clean up vomit.
  - Use caution when emptying commodes.
  
- Launder soiled bedding and other linens immediately and use appropriate PPE.

## Food services

Dietary/food staff can be a source of ongoing transmission of illness by contaminating food.

- Contact your dietary department to determine if dietary staff are ill (add them to the LINE LIST if so).
  - Notify your regular health inspector or call Wake County Environmental Health at 919-856-5700 or [healthandsafety@wake.gov](mailto:healthandsafety@wake.gov) if dietary staff are ill. Your health inspector can work with the kitchen to implement additional prevention measures.
- Monitor for dietary staff illness during the outbreak using the food service employee screening form.
- Exclude dietary staff with vomiting or diarrhea from work until they are symptom-free for 24 hours or have medical clearance.
- Clean and sanitize all kitchen and dining area surfaces with a product described in the cleaning section checklist.
- Discontinue all self-service food/drinks including self-service foods using tongs or other serving utensils.
- Postpone or cancel common events such as birthdays, holidays and special celebrations until the conclusion of the outbreak.
- Restrict sharing of communal food/snack items and food brought in from outside the facility or prepared by residents.