Outbreaks in Health Care Facilities – What families and visitors need to know

What is an outbreak?

- An outbreak is a sudden increase in the number of residents and staff who are sick.
- Two common types of outbreaks in health care facilities are:
    1. Respiratory infections (runny nose, sore throat, cough, sneezing, fever)
    2. Gastrointestinal infections (nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea)
- Infections may be caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites.

Why are outbreaks declared?

- For the health and well-being of residents and staff, it is important to control and stop outbreaks as quickly as possible.
- Any illness spread during outbreaks can be life-threatening to residents.
- Long-term care and retirement homes are legally required to report outbreaks to the local Medical Officer of Health and work with the Health Unit to try to stop the spread of illness.

What happens during an outbreak?

Many strategies are used to stop the spread of illness during an outbreak, including:

- Increased cleaning and disinfection.
- Increased focus on hand washing and use of hand sanitizer.
- Use of personal protective equipment (mask, gloves, gown, eye protection) when caring for sick residents.
- Sick residents are encouraged to remain in their rooms while they are unwell or until they are no longer contagious.
- Non-urgent appointments may be rescheduled until after the outbreak is over.
- New admissions and transfers between facilities may be postponed.
- Large group activities may be cancelled or changed.

Can I still visit during an outbreak:

Please check with the facility's visitor policy during outbreaks. If you do visit there are steps you should take to prevent yourself and others from getting sick.

Do not visit if you have any of the following:
Fever, cough, sneezing, sore throat, stuffy or runny nose, diarrhea, vomiting, upset stomach.

- Get your flu shot every year and stay up to date with vaccinations.
- Wash your hands well and often with warm water and soap or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Visit residents in their rooms and avoid common areas.
- Visit only one resident. If you must visit more than one resident, visit the well resident first.
- Wear personal protective equipment (mask, gloves, gown and eye protection) as needed. Signs will be posted or you can check with the nursing station.

Always wash or sanitize your hands:

- When you enter and leave the facility
- When you enter and leave a resident room
- Before and after helping with resident care
- Before handling any food or drinks

For further information, please contact the Communicable Disease Control (CDC) Program at 705-474-1400 or toll free at 1-800-563-2808, ext. 5229.

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