

Norovirus hits Florida, region hard

'Stomach flu' outbreaks on rise

BY FRANK GLUCK • FGLUCK@NEWS-PRESS.COM • MARCH 22, 2010

1:10 A.M. — Sickesses common to nursing homes and cruise ships jumped 50 percent this year throughout Florida, public health officials say, including more than a dozen outbreaks in Lee and Collier counties.

Since December, Lee County has seen five outbreaks of norovirus, which is nonfatal but can cause nausea and diarrhea, said Dr. Robert South, epidemiologist with the county Health Department.

This time last year, three outbreaks had been reported in Lee.

The 100 or so individual cases here were found at one public school and four nursing homes, the health department said.

Norovirus is commonly spread in the winter months, but public health officials are not sure why this year's numbers increased so dramatically.

It is most likely just a random occurrence, South said.

"There's no particular reason," he said. "It's just a variation of the cycle."

Collier County has had up to 90 cases this year, all in nine nursing homes, said Deb Millsap, Health Department spokeswoman.

So far, the state Health Department has tracked 91 outbreaks statewide, compared with 47 this time last year.

An outbreak is defined as two or more cases at the same location and at the same time.

In the case of nursing homes, health departments recommended a temporary hold on new admittances. These quarantines are lifted more than 48 hours after the last case is confirmed.

The last Collier facility closed to new admittances was declared norovirus-free Wednesday. A remaining Lee nursing home is expected to be cleared this week.

Neither the state nor county health departments would identify the specific nursing homes or school, citing medical privacy rules.

Norovirus, which is found in feces and vomit, is readily spread by physical contact with contaminated food, objects or people.

It is often known as the "stomach flu" (although it is not influenza-related), food poisoning or gastroenteritis.

Symptoms can include a long list of ailments: nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, stomach cramping, fever, chills, headache and overall weakness.

They often come quickly after contamination and typically last up to two days.

Although generally not life-threatening, it can sometimes cause dehydration that requires medical attention, especially for the very young and the very old.

"We encourage the public to practice good hygiene that includes washing hands frequently and keeping sick at home," said Susan Smith, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Health. "This will help slow the spread of the virus."