



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Department of Public Health
Bureau of Infectious Disease and Laboratory Sciences
305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

MAURA T. HEALEY
Governor
KIMBERLEY DRISCOLL
Lieutenant Governor

Division of Epidemiology
Tel: (617) 983-6800
Fax: (617) 983-6840
www.mass.gov/dph/epi

KATHLEEN E. WALSH
Secretary
ROBERT GOLDSTEIN, MD, PhD
Commissioner
Tel: 617-624-6000
www.mass.gov/dph

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Dear Educators and Providers,

Each winter, outbreaks of gastrointestinal (GI) illness occur in child care programs and schools, including preschools, elementary schools, and secondary schools (kindergarten through grade 12). GI illness is a general term that refers to diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, or abdominal cramps, usually caused by an infection. GI illness outbreaks are commonly caused by norovirus, a very contagious virus that causes a sudden onset of vomiting and diarrhea.

A GI illness outbreak is defined as an increase in individuals experiencing diarrhea or vomiting above what is normal for a facility, with regard to time and place. This includes illness among both children and staff. For example, if there are three children in the same classroom sick with vomiting and diarrhea within one week and that number is more than what is typically seen, then an outbreak may be occurring.

Suspected outbreaks of any illness are reportable by child care programs and schools to the local board of health or Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) per regulation [105 CMR 300.134](#). To facilitate the reporting of GI illness outbreaks, a new online reporting form was developed and published online in December 2024:

"Gastrointestinal Illness Child Care & K-12 School Cluster Reporting Form"
<https://infectious-disease-reporting.dph.mass.gov/pages/CaseReportForms>

Please use this online reporting form to report outbreaks of GI illness at your child care program or school. Outbreaks should be reported when they are first identified. Sick individuals do not have to have a medical diagnosis or laboratory testing for illnesses to be considered an outbreak. After completion and submission of the online form, the local board of health or a DPH epidemiologist will call you to provide guidance on outbreak management and control.

More information on norovirus can be found online:

- DPH norovirus fact sheet: mass.gov/info-details/norovirus
- CDC norovirus website: cdc.gov/norovirus

Please find attached a one-page reference sheet outlining reporting guidance for GI illness outbreaks and a GI illness symptom checklist to determine when a sick child or staff member should stay home and return to school. Please contact your local board of health or the DPH Division of Epidemiology with any questions regarding the reporting or investigation of GI illness outbreaks. The Division of Epidemiology can be reached by calling (617) 983-6800.

We appreciate your assistance in this process.

Sincerely,

Catherine M. Brown, DVM, MSc, MPH
State Epidemiologist and State Public Health Veterinarian

Larry Madoff, MD
Medical Director

Guidance for Child Care Programs and K-12 Schools Reporting Gastrointestinal (GI) Illness Outbreaks to Public Health

Suspected or confirmed outbreaks of any illness are required to be reported to the local board of health in the community where they occur or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) per regulation [105 CMR 300.134](#).

A gastrointestinal illness outbreak is defined as an increase in individuals with diarrhea or vomiting above what is expected for a facility, with regard to time and place. This includes illness among both children and staff.

GI illness is a general term that refers to diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, or abdominal cramps, usually caused by an infection. GI illness outbreaks are commonly caused by norovirus, a highly contagious virus that spreads easily from person to person in child care programs and schools. Food, surfaces, and other commonly touched objects can also be contaminated with the virus.

Outbreaks should be reported to the local board of health or DPH as soon as they are identified by completing the following online reporting form:

<https://infectious-disease-reporting.dph.mass.gov/pages/CaseReportForms>

After completion and submission of the online form, the local board of health or a DPH epidemiologist will call the submitter to provide guidance on outbreak management and control. The form only needs to be submitted once. For any questions on reporting and GI illness outbreak investigations, please contact your local board of health or the DPH Division of Epidemiology at (617) 983-6800.

Resources

- DPH norovirus fact sheet: mass.gov/info-details/norovirus
- CDC norovirus website: cdc.gov/norovirus
- Call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health at (617) 983-6800 or your local board of health.

Gastrointestinal Illness Symptom Checklist for Children and Staff in Child Care Programs and K-12 Schools

Gastrointestinal (GI) illness season in Massachusetts usually starts in late fall and runs through the spring. GI illness is a general term that refers to diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, or abdominal cramps, usually caused by an infection. GI illness outbreaks are commonly caused by norovirus, a very contagious virus that causes a sudden onset of vomiting and diarrhea. Norovirus infections usually last about 1 to 3 days, but people can spread the virus for days after they feel better.

To keep GI illnesses from spreading in the community, use the checklist below to determine whether your child should attend child care or school.

GI illness in a child: Should I keep my child home?		
In the past week:	Yes	No
1. Has your child received a diagnosis of norovirus by their healthcare provider based on symptoms or laboratory testing? <i>If your child has received a diagnosis of a different GI pathogen, the child care program or school should be notified. Different exclusion recommendations may be advised.</i>		
2. Has your child experienced a sudden onset of vomiting and/or diarrhea with no other apparent cause? <i>Diarrhea is defined as three or more loose stools in a 24-hour period. Non-infectious causes may include a reaction to medicine, pre-existing health condition, food intolerance, or food allergy.</i>		
If you answered YES to either question above, keep your child at home until the criteria below are met.		

After GI illness: Can my child return to child care or school?		
	Yes	No
1. Has your child gone 24 hours with improvement in diarrhea, as evidenced by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stool frequency of no more than 2 above what is normal for the child, <u>and</u> • Diapered children have stools contained in the diaper, and toilet-trained children have not had toileting accidents? <i>If baseline stool frequency is not known, the child should stay home until 24 hours after their diarrhea has resolved.</i>		
2. Has your child gone 24 hours since their last vomiting episode?		
3. Is your child well enough to participate in child care or school?		
If you answered NO to any questions above, keep your child at home until all three criteria are met to prevent spreading illness to others. If you answered YES to all the questions above, your child can return to child care or school. During an outbreak, your local board of health may provide additional recommendations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with GI illness who have foodhandling duties at school (e.g., participation in a culinary course or program) cannot perform foodhandling duties until 72 hours past the resolution of their symptoms, per regulation 105 CMR 300.200. 		

Gastrointestinal Illness Symptom Checklist for Children and Staff in Child Care Programs and K-12 Schools

Educators, providers, staff, and volunteers in child care programs and schools with GI illness should use the checklist below to determine if they need to be excluded to prevent the spread of GI illness. State regulations require individuals with certain foodhandling duties not perform those responsibilities during and after their illness.

GI illness in staff: Do I need to be excluded?		
In the past week:	Yes	No
1. Have you received a diagnosis of norovirus by your healthcare provider based on symptoms or laboratory testing? <i>If you have received a diagnosis of a different GI pathogen, your employer should be notified. Different exclusion recommendations may be advised.</i>		
2. Have you experienced a sudden onset of vomiting and/or diarrhea with no other apparent cause? <i>Diarrhea is defined as three or more loose stools in a 24-hour period. Non-infectious causes may include a reaction to medicine, pre-existing health condition, food intolerance, or food allergy.</i>		
If you answered YES to either question above, proceed to questions 3 through 7.		
In your role at the child care program or school, do you:		
3. Handle food served to children or staff, with or without gloves? <i>Examples include handling unpackaged fresh fruit as a cashier in the cafeteria, assisting children with lunches brought from home, etc.</i>		
4. Prepare food served to children and staff, with or without gloves? <i>Examples include any cutting, chopping, cooking, baking, or other preparation of meals, snacks, or beverages served to children and staff, etc.</i>		
5. Handle clean dishes or utensils used by children or staff, with or without gloves? <i>Examples include dishwashing, handling plates, trays, or utensils for children and staff, etc.</i>		
6. Give children oral medications, with or without gloves?		
7. Assist children with feeding, with or without gloves?		
If you answered YES to any questions 3 through 7, you are considered a foodhandler and cannot perform any of the above duties until 72 hours past the resolution of symptoms (as evidenced by no further vomiting or diarrhea) per regulation 105 CMR 300.200. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you had laboratory testing that was positive for norovirus, do not perform the above duties until 72 hours after the date the specimen was produced. 		
If you answered NO to every question 3 through 7, you are not required to be excluded.		

Where can I find more information about GI illness?

- DPH norovirus fact sheet: mass.gov/info-details/norovirus
- CDC norovirus website: cdc.gov/norovirus/index.html
- Call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health at (617) 983-6800 or your local board of health.