

Dear Friends,

Colleges in Boston and local healthcare facilities are seeing a spike in cases of gastroenteritis (vomiting and/or diarrhea, sometimes called “stomach flu”) caused by the norovirus family of viruses. Wesleyan’s Davison Health Center has seen a few cases in recent days and campus has experienced widespread outbreaks in past years. This is a preventable illness and we’d like your help in limiting transmission.

The onset of gastroenteritis may be gradual (over 12-24 hours) or more sudden, sometimes waking students from sleep with a bout of nausea and vomiting, accompanied in some cases by headache, dizziness, sense of temperature disequilibrium and fatigue. In some cases the diarrhea starts immediately, but in most it starts about 12 hours after the vomiting, which has usually resolved by that time.

The route of transmission of these infections is typically fecal-oral, specifically failure to wash hands properly after using the toilet and before food preparation and/or consumption. That’s right, you get it by eating poop.

Viral gastroenteritis infections are readily transmitted to others, especially in a close community such as Wesleyan. The time of maximal viral shedding (contagious phase) is in the first 24-48 hours. Persons are considered non-contagious after 72 hours. Although recovery is typically rapid (24-48 hours) and complete, the intervening hours are miserable. Caution on the part of the well and responsible behavior on the part of the ill can drastically reduce the number of individuals affected.

To optimally protect yourself, please do the following:

Thoroughly wash hands with soap immediately after using the toilet and before handling any food or drinks. Hand sanitizer is not effective in killing the norovirus. Avoid sharing towels, cups, silverware, toothbrushes and other personal items.

Consider avoiding communal foods whereby several people may come in contact with the food you eat, such as bowls of chips or bags of popcorn.

If you become ill, please do the following:

- Stay in your room and rest.
- During the vomiting phase, avoid putting anything into your stomach: it will only cause more vomiting. Wait until a few hours after last bout of vomiting, and then try a few sips of bottled water (Middletown tap water can upset sensitive stomachs) or ginger ale. Sports drinks, too, are to be avoided as they often make nausea worse. Dehydration is unlikely to become a significant issue during the short duration of this phase of the illness.
- During the diarrhea phase, assuming the nausea has relented and appetite is returning, do make a concerted effort to keep up with fluid loss by drinking filtered water, ginger ale, or other gentle beverages. Optimally you should be urinating every few hours and urine should be clear or light in color. Dark or burning urine suggests that fluid intake is sub-optimal.
- If vomiting is very heavy or lasting more than a few hours, a medication can be prescribed which is usually quite effective in treating nausea and vomiting.

Be very conscientious about hand washing and avoidance of exposing others, especially in the first three days after becoming ill.

Once your appetite begins to return, slowly reintroduce solid foods focusing on bland foods such as bananas, rice, applesauce and toast.

Expect that for a few days after this you will be more sensitive to certain foods, especially lactose-containing foods. It is also common and normal to have a relative disinhibition of the gastro-colic reflex (normal in infants, suppressed in adults) such that you will have the urge to have a bowel movement soon after eating.

If you have questions or concerns, please call the Health Center at (860) 685-2470.

We are open 9-6 Monday through Friday, 9-5 Fridays and 10-2 Saturdays.

A doctor is on call when we are closed, but we encourage students to try to call during office hours when we have the most available resources.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter,

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