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- Home
- News**
- The Lamp Post
- Sports
- Opinion
- Calendar
- Features
- Obituaries
- Classifieds
- Homes North
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News

Local stomach bug likely norovirus: Virus is not just cruise ship illness



Jonathan L'Ecuyer/*Staff photo* — Dr. Terence Moran of Merrimack Valley Child & Adolescent Health, finishes a scheduled check up with 6-month-old Alivia Cerasuolo. Three weeks prior, on New Year's Day, Cerasuolo and her mother, Cassandra Verdura, both of Haverhill, were in the Merrimack Valley Hospital emergency room suffering from norovirus.

By Jonathan L'Ecuyer
Staff Writer

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Haverhill doctors report a higher than normal number of patients with a stomach bug they believe is a strain of norovirus.

"We've had quite the outbreak this year, more than in previous years," said Dr. Terence Moran, a pediatrician at Merrimack Medical Center. "It's not surprising because they are also experiencing an outbreak in Europe and Japan; these things get around the globe quickly with the way people travel these days."

One of Moran's youngest patients, 6-month-old Alivia Cerasuolo of Haverhill, spent New Year's Day in the

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- ▶ Hitting the mark
- ▶ New arrivals
- ▶ Business after hours
- ▶ Business briefs
- ▶ Cultural grants awarded: Community input meeting May 16
- ▶ Services you qualify for change from state to state
- ▶ First birthdays
- ▶ Folktales on stage
- ▶ A look ahead Loan to repair ladder truck to be discussed Monday
- ▶ Marriage intentions
- ▶ Northern Essex dean's list
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emergency room at Merrimack Valley Hospital with the virus. Cerasuolo's mother, Cassandra Verdura, said the virus swept through her household in late December and early January. Mid-to-late December is often considered the peak norovirus season.

During the six weeks from Dec. 1 to Jan. 17, Boston emergency rooms took care of 3,700 patients with the virus. In New Hampshire there have been 41 outbreaks in communities, causing 1,400 patients to seek treatment.

The Boston Public Health Commission sent out an alert Jan. 23 to local pediatricians about the virus' effect on young children in the Greater Boston area. The alert points to a surge in patients seeking care for nausea, vomiting and diarrhea that corresponded with a rise in dehydration cases — one of the most threatening problems for young children and the elderly. According to the alert, 20 percent of all visits, and 27 percent of all dehydration visits to Boston emergency rooms, were by children under five years old between Dec. 1 and Jan. 15. The same report stated that 37 percent of dehydration cases in that same time were from people age 64 and older.

Norovirus causes acute gastroenteritis and usually begins to affect the individual 24 to 48 hours after it is ingested. People infected with the virus are contagious from the moment they begin feeling ill to at least three days after recovery; some may be contagious for as long as two weeks after feeling better.

The major symptoms of the norovirus illness are nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and dehydration. Some also suffer from fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and drowsiness.

People become infected with the virus when they ingest contaminated food or liquids, if they touch infected surfaces or objects, or by direct contact with another infected individual's vomit or waste.

Moran suggest that people be extra cautious around communal areas this time of year, particularly with a known stomach bug in the area.

"Be cautious around salad bars and food handlers that prepare things for you that are not cooked," Moran said. "You may want to opt for something that is cooked if there is an outbreak."

Dr. Jana Oettinger, a hospitalist at Merrimack Valley Hospital who takes care of about half of admitted patients, said 10 individuals in the last 60 days have sought treatment at the hospital with presumed norovirus.

Each winter, people line up for immunization from the flu,

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but there is no shot to stave off the highly contagious stomach bug that has recently become synonymous with cruise ships.

The Queen Elizabeth 2 became the first cruise ship of 2007 to suffer a massive outbreak of norovirus — 263 passengers and 27 crew members became ill after it departed from its Southampton, England port on Jan. 2 for a 106-day trip around the world. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that last year 28 cruise ship outbreaks were caused by the norovirus.

Japan has seen its highest average weekly outbreak rate since tracking of the virus began in 1981. Germany, Hungary, and now the United States have all reported extremely high rates of the virus in 2006 and that is expected again in 2007. Those in the medical community are not surprised because 2006/2007 was predicted to be a highly active norovirus season by those who study its patterns.

In addition to norovirus, Dr. Craig Weston of Pentucket Medical Associates, has noticed an unusually persistent cold this season with the most defining symptom being a nagging cough that lingers for several weeks.

"There is not just one cause for viral illnesses; 85 percent of illness is viral, 15 percent is bacterial," Weston said. "Most (illnesses) won't respond to antibiotics and viruses can change within the season. It's possible that someone could suffer from the same virus more than once because the temporary protection produced by the immune system against the first strain is useless against the newer, mutated strain."

Weston added that some people who think they are experiencing colds lasting for five or more weeks may actually be suffering from post-viral symptoms.

"Some people don't get over the cold for several weeks. The virus goes away, but the post viral period persists," he said. "Drippy nose, chest congestion, soreness, and even coughing are all symptoms that can persist after the virus has gone."

Weston, who admitted suffering from a month-long cold back in December, added that some people may become ill with one virus for about two weeks, recover, and then immediately come down with another virus for another two weeks, leading the person to believe they have actually suffered from one, long cold.

Weston, who is also a professor at Tufts University, suggests people take care of themselves this time of year by drinking lots of fluid, getting adequate sleep, washing hands frequently, eating well, and getting a flu vaccine.