



Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

Dear Directors of Nursing and Care Managers

PREPARING FOR OUTBREAKS OF GASTROENTERITIS

Outbreaks of gastroenteritis (gastro) in aged care homes are most common between late winter through to early summer, but can occur throughout the year. With outbreaks of gastro already being reported, this is a timely reminder to review your infection control plans to ensure the best protection for those living and working in your homes.

Nearly all of the gastro outbreaks in aged care homes are person to person transmission with a viral aetiology, rather than foodborne transmission, with less than five per cent of gastro outbreaks in aged care homes being foodborne.

Outbreaks of viral gastro are extremely difficult to control, due to the highly infectious nature of the viruses. Early control measures are critical in minimising the impact and spread of gastro. The best means of preventing viral gastro is to ensure that people maintain good hygiene practices, and that they do not work while ill with symptoms of gastro, which are:

- Diarrhoea
- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Loss of appetite
- Fever
- Headaches
- General weakness

Note that residents may not experience all of the above signs and symptoms.

As you are aware, under the *Aged Care Act 1997* aged care providers are required to meet their State or Territory public health legislation. As each State and Territory has their own requirements regarding reporting to their public health units, please ensure you know what the requirements are in your State or Territory and include this information and any guidelines in your infection control plan.

I encourage you to also report any suspected outbreaks to your local State or Territory office of the Department of Health and Ageing, or you may use the Aged Care Complaints Investigation Scheme number 1800 550 552.

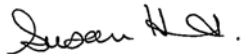
The Department has developed a set of resources to assist you to manage an outbreak of gastroenteritis. Copies of the *Gastro Info Gastroenteritis Kit for Aged Care* were distributed to all aged care providers in November 2008. The *Gastro Info Kit* includes a brochure *'Flu & Gastro: Managing infectious diseases in aged care homes'* which has proved useful in

providing family, friends and carers of residents with information on gastro before and/or during an outbreak. The Kit contains useful information and resources covering how to:

- Identify the signs and symptoms of a gastroenteritis outbreak;
- Nominate an Outbreak Coordinator to oversee a potential outbreak;
- Engage in infection control practices to prevent outbreaks and proper specimen collection and storage;
- Handle food during an outbreak and proper cleaning procedures;
- Develop an Outbreak Management Plan for gastroenteritis and influenza before an outbreak occurs;
- Notify relevant State or Territory health authorities; and
- Inform residents and families in the event of an outbreak.

The *Gastro Info Kit* is available electronically on the website of the Department of Health and Ageing at www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ageing-publicat-gastro-kit.htm or you can request further copies of these resources through National Mail and Marketing on 1800 020 103 or at nmm@nationalmailing.com.au.

Yours sincerely



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