

Virus delivers a punch. Wash your hands and sip that soup.

Posted to: [Health and Medicine News](#)

By [Elizabeth Simpson](#)
The Virginian-Pilot
© February 14, 2009

The patients who pass through Dr. Mark Hippenstiel's office these days are usually on a journey down one of two tracks of misery:

Coughing, sneezing, body aches and congestion. Or stomach cramps, vomiting and diarrhea.

This year, though, he's seen a good many who went for the works.

"Body aches, vomiting, fever - the list goes on," said Hippenstiel, who works in a Patient First medical center on Indian River Road in Virginia Beach. "I ask them, 'What don't you have?' "

It's that time of year, folks.

Not just for flu, colds and respiratory infections, but for a dreadful array of stomach viruses. In health terms, there's the lofty name "norovirus illness" and the not-so-lofty "winter vomiting disease."

Throughout Virginia in January, the state health department recorded 63 norovirus outbreaks, defined as a cluster of cases in a facility such as a day care center or a nursing home. Twenty-two of those were in the eastern region, which includes all of Hampton Roads. That's an increase from 53 outbreaks statewide in December and five in the eastern region.

Larry Hill, spokesman for the state health department's eastern region, said code requirements for nursing homes and assisted-living facilities to report such outbreaks have become more stringent in the past year. That means the number of reported cases might seem high even if the incidence is typical for the season.

Health officials ask facilities to restrict visitation until the virus has subsided.

Pediatrician Hugh McPhee started seeing a surge of stomach virus cases last week at Pediatric Diagnostic Center practices in Norfolk and Virginia Beach.

"Like the flu, it tends to come in a wave," he said.

In more ways than one, no doubt.

"It's a seasonal illness, and we're definitely in the season."

Though stomach bugs can strike any time during the year, winter months are their favorite because people are cooped up inside together.

Time is the only cure for a stomach virus, but there is some relief for symptoms.

Lay off solid food. Drink clear fluids such as juice and water to stay hydrated. Stay home from school or work. Ease chicken noodle soup into your diet.

"It's the one time you'll get a doctor to recommend drinking something salty," Hippenstiel said.

Usually the illness subsides in a day or two, but if people can't drink enough to replace fluids they've lost, they can become dehydrated. That's more common among young children, the elderly and people with weak immune systems.

That's when you need to see a doctor, who can order intravenous fluids.

"Usually, by the time people get to me, they're behind the eight ball," Hippenstiel said.

"They're fighting a losing battle and can get better quicker with IV fluids."

McPhee said signs of dehydration in children are reduced urine output and a mouth that's dry and feels furry.

"If they're complaining vociferously, they're usually OK," he said.

And for those who haven't yet had winter vomiting disease, here's a tip: Wash your hands with soap and water - early and often.

Elizabeth Simpson, (757) 446-2635, elizabeth.simpson@pilotonline.com