

Stomach bug hits area

Virus takes its toll on two assisted living facilities

By JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER

PORT CHARLOTTE — A highly infectious stomach bug has spread through Charlotte County, creating an outbreak at least two assisted living facilities.

Several residents and employees of South Port Square and Sterling House in Port Charlotte have been hospitalized with the Norovirus, a rapidly spreading stomach flu.

Neither facility has been quarantined, and South Port Square is restricting visitation in hopes of getting the virus controlled.

"This is a serious issue, and we're working hard to restore the health of our residents and employees," said Dennis Dishong, South Port Square executive director. "This is one of those viruses that can spread through the community pretty quickly."

South Port Square has about 550 residents and 300 employees. Dishong declined to give specifics on the number infected, but did say he believes the virus first surfaced around Jan. 7.

Sterling House assisted living also reported a viral outbreak believed to be the Norovirus, and four residents remain in the hospital, said Holly Botsford, spokeswoman for Brookdale Senior Living, Sterling House's parent company.

The facility's dining room closed Jan. 13 and all group activities were temporarily discontinued. Both have since resumed normal service.

The Health Department has been notified of the issue.

"All suggestions and necessary precautions were taken to protect residents," Botsford said in a statement. "We take all measures reasonable and necessary to protect their health, their dignity, and their privacy."

Norovirus symptoms typically begin 24-48 hours after exposure and include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach cramping. The illness is usually brief, with symptoms lasting only a day or two, according to the Florida Department of Health.

The virus doesn't typically require hospitalization with healthy adults, but tends to become more severe with seniors who get dehydrated by its symptoms, said Michele Ritter, director of marketing for Fawcett Memorial Hospital.

"This is the same virus you hear about on cruise ships," she said. "It's spreading throughout the community, but the focus seems to be in nursing homes."

Fawcett has seen a recent uptick in patients with Norovirus, and visitation for those infected is prohibited. The best means for prevention is constant hand washing — sanitizer won't cut it, Ritter said.

A similar Norovirus outbreak occurred last year. The virus can be spread through contact, surfaces and droplets in the air.

"The problem is this virus is so contagious and passed so quickly," Ritter said. "The older folks that get this typically have immune systems that are already compromised, and it becomes a mess."

Other area nursing homes are now on the lookout for potential outbreaks, constantly disinfecting surfaces and tightening visitation rules.

"(Norovirus) can just fly through a building," said Karen Hallenbeck, executive director of the Royal Palm Retirement Centre in Port Charlotte. "We had a bad outbreak in the past, so no one is permitted in the building without disinfecting. The elderly are very fragile, and an illness like this can really take its toll."

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