

PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT: Be aware of gastro in your kōhanga / early learning service

30 November 2023

There has been an increase in gastroenteritis (gastro) cases in kōhanga / early learning services and their facilities around the motu. Below is information for your learning centre, staff and whānau about the following:

- What is gastro?
- What to do if you suspect a gastro outbreak
- Rotavirus and the available childhood vaccination
- Gastro guidance resources to support you
- Tips to reduce the spread of gastro at your centre

What is gastro?

Gastro (also known as a tummy bug, rotavirus or norovirus) is a serious illness caused by an infection in our terotero (gut). Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and fever.

Gastro can spread easily from an infected person on to others through contact with infected vomit/faeces, breathing in virus particles, hands coming into contact with mouth after touching contaminated items/surfaces, or consuming contaminated food or water.

When a person is sick with vomiting and/or diarrhoea it can cause the body to lose more fluid than is taken in, this can lead to dehydration. Pēpi (babies/infants) and tamariki (young children) are more likely to get dehydrated when sick with a gastro illness as they can lose fluid more quickly. This can lead to hospitalisation.

What to do if you suspect a gastro outbreak

If you have three or more tamariki and/or staff at your centre develop vomiting and/or diarrhoea within 7 days, you may have an outbreak. You should contact your local public health service (PHS) for support. To prevent further spread of illness, follow this guidance:

- **Notify your local PHS with urgency if any of the following apply so they can support and guide you on next steps. [See here for a list of local PHS and their contact details.](#)**
 - The number of people in your centre with vomiting and/or diarrhoea exceeds a locally defined threshold (please check with your local PHS).
 - 15% or more of people (staff and/or tamariki) at your centre report vomiting and/or diarrhoea at any time.
 - The number of people unwell with gastro symptoms doubles in a short timeframe (i.e., within a week).
 - Symptom onset among cases was at the same time or after an event at the centre.

For general health advice you can also call Healthline free on 0800 611 116 at any time, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Rotavirus vaccination for pēpi under 6 months old

Rotavirus is a highly contagious virus that infects the intestine, causing gastro symptoms (vomiting and diarrhoea) and sometimes fever and seizures. Pēpi and tamariki are predominantly affected by this virus, with some becoming so unwell that they require hospital care.

Vaccination is highly effective against severe rotavirus diarrhoea. It is the best form of protection and prevents 8 out of 10 pēpi/tamariki from severe rotavirus infection.

Pēpi are immunised against rotavirus as part of their routine childhood immunisations. Pēpi need two doses for best protection. The vaccine is free. The first dose should be given before a pēpi turns 15 weeks old, and the second dose **must** be given before they're 25 weeks old.

Please encourage whānau and caregivers to ensure that their pēpi/tamariki have up-to-date vaccinations.

Guidance resources

Here are some online resources that provide kōhanga / early learning services with further information, guidance and support with managing a gastro outbreak:

- [Gastroenteritis | Regional Public Health](#)
- [Taonga Mokopuna Video Resources | Regional Public Health](#)

How to reduce the spread of gastro

- **Stay home if unwell**
 - People who are vomiting and/or have diarrhoea should stay at home to recover until at least 2 days (48 hours) after the end of their symptoms.
- **Isolate unwell people and send them home**
 - People who are vomiting and/or have diarrhoea at your centre should be isolated in a separate room from others and leave the centre or be collected by whānau/caregivers as soon as possible.
- **Set up an illness log to record how many people are unwell and how they may be linked**
 - Record each time someone reports being unwell with gastro symptoms, where they are located, when they became unwell and recover, and what actions have been taken to reduce transmission. This will help your local PHS understand whether the outbreak is under control.
- **Communicate**
 - During an outbreak it is essential that all staff (including casual staff, contractors and cleaners) and parents are aware of the outbreak, any instructions people need to follow to help reduce the spread. Your local PHS can help with this advice.
 - Remind whānau/caregivers to keep tamariki at home if they become unwell.

- **Personal protective equipment**
 - Staff caring for tamariki with gastro symptoms can wear gloves and an apron if available to provide additional protection for themselves.
- **Hand hygiene**
 - Encourage staff and tamariki to regularly wash their hands with soap and running water, and dry them thoroughly to reduce transmission.
 - Hand washing should occur every time staff, tamariki or other visitors to the centre use the toilet, handle food/drink, change nappies, touch any contaminated items, or remove used gloves.
 - In addition, tamariki should be helped to wash their hands with soap and water after having their nappies changed in case they have touched their bottom area while the nappy is removed.
 - Hand sanitiser can also be used in addition, but not in replacement for washing hands with soap and water when hands are dirty.
- **Cleaning and disinfection**
 - Ensure regular cleaning of facilities, paying special attention to high-touch surfaces and objects. This is particularly important for areas and equipment that needs to be shared by staff.
 - If you have cases, increased regular cleaning and disinfection of surfaces, rooms and affected areas, especially bathrooms and toilets is required.
 - Clean up vomit or faeces using a diluted solution of household chlorine bleach made fresh each day. Cordon off area while cleaning. Store bleach mixture safely.
 - Wash items and areas contaminated by faeces or vomit separately in warm or hot water and then disinfect using bleach. This includes cleaning nappy change areas after every use.
- **Handling of waste**
 - Infectious waste, such as dirty nappies or disposable cloths used to clean up vomit, should be carefully placed into a waste bag and tied when $\frac{3}{4}$ full to prevent overfilling.
- **Keep spaces well ventilated**
 - Open windows and doors of communal rooms and areas several times a day to increase fresh air flow. If mechanical ventilation is used, ensure the ventilation system is regularly maintained.

Thank you for helping to keep our pēpi, tamariki, their whānau and your staff safe from gastro.