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**MEDICAL HEALTH OFFICER ADVISES ALL TO WASH THEIR HANDS**

WHITEHORSE – The Yukon’s Medical Health Officer, Dr. Bryce Larke, is reminding Yukon residents and tourists alike to wash their hands frequently.

Larke said today that with the many visitors expected through the Yukon this summer, either via cruise ship, tour bus or private vehicle, there is a good possibility that the Yukon will see increasing numbers of cases of norovirus and other infectious diseases.

“Norovirus infection is globally present,” said Larke. “It’s here all year long although we might see more of it during the summer months. A few cases of laboratory-proven norovirus illness have been reported along the Alaska Highway this month, in both tourists and Yukoners.”

Norovirus (formerly known as Norwalk agent) is a common cause of gastrointestinal illness often referred to as stomach flu, although it has no relationship to “bird flu” or the influenza virus that causes respiratory illness each fall and winter in Canada. The most common symptoms of norovirus infection are nausea with vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal cramps. These symptoms occur in all age groups although diarrhea is more common among adults while vomiting is more common among children. Some people also experience headache, chills, fever and muscle aches. Generally the symptoms appear from 12 to 48 hours after exposure to the virus but then usually last only 24 to 48 hours.

“For most people, norovirus is an inconvenience. They don’t feel well for a couple of days but that’s it. For the elderly and the frail, it can be more serious. There is no vaccine against norovirus. We just advise people to wash their hands. This is probably the single most effective way of preventing the spread of this disease and other infections caused by various viruses and bacteria,” said Larke.

Norovirus spreads easily from person to person. It can be spread through the air during vomiting and is easily spread by eating food or drinking water contaminated with feces from an infected person. The virus can also be picked up by touching things like door handles or telephone hand sets that have been used recently by someone with norovirus infection.

“Thorough hand-washing following toilet use and prior to handling food is the best way to prevent the spread of norovirus. Persons who are currently ill with diarrhea or vomiting should not be handling food, working in day care centres or caring for patients in a health care facility until their symptoms have been gone for 48 hours,” said Larke.

The Medical Health Officer said his advice was purely cautionary.

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