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Norwalk virus is 'incredibly transmissible'

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remains open, Southlake president Dan Carriere is asking residents to seek medical care from their family physicians or walk-in clinics where possible.

Meanwhile, Markham Stouffville Hospital president Dr. Jim MacLean said Norwalk outbreaks at other hospitals have left his facility scrambling to care for re-directed patients.

RISK TO STAFF

"Basically, we're working very hard to decrease the risk to our staff and to our patients as well as trying to monitor our capacity as much as we can through this to help the system."

At a media conference Friday morning, York Central president Frank Lussing said the hospital took the unprecedented step of closing its emergency department and banning visits by the general public after the virus began spreading rapidly through the wards.

One patient, from the cardiac step-down program for people recovering from severe heart illnesses, has been confirmed with the virus.

Another nine patients, including eight from the cardiac step-down program on three-north ward, are display-

ing symptoms and suspected to be carrying the virus. In addition, 24 hospital employees had called in sick, suspected of having the virus.

"And that is probably changing while we're speaking. The situation is very fluid and evolving as we speak," Mr. Lussing said.

"It (closing the emergency room) is unprecedented at York Central Hospital. This is the first time in our history we've had to resort to closure of the ER."

Between 150 and 200 patients a day are normally treated in the emergency room.

Dr. Schabas said the extreme measures were taken to try to stem transmission of the virus.

"No doubt it puts a strain on other hospitals, but we have no other choice."

Norwalk has forced the closure of other southern Ontario hospital wards including the emergency department at Toronto's Sunnybrook hospital last month. It has also left the cruise industry crippled after hundreds of passengers on several ships were struck with the virus.

'For reasons I don't think anybody understands, there seems to be a lot of (Norwalk) activity this winter.'

"For reasons I don't think anybody understands, there seems to be a lot of (Norwalk) activity this winter," Dr. Schabas said.

"Infectious disease experts across the city are scratching their heads."

Dr. Schabas, who stressed patients should attend scheduled medical procedures at the hospital unless notified otherwise, said York Central will only open the emergency department and permit visiting hours 72 hours after the final Norwalk victim is free of symptoms.

Mr. Carriere said Southlake began re-directing non-critical ambulance patients to other hospitals after at least 70 of its staff phoned in sick suffering from gastrointestinal problems.

"I think that's a conservative estimate. We've had three times the normal sick calls from staff," he said.

"It's not an outbreak at this point but it's pretty taxing."

While patients are still permitted visitors, Mr. Carriere said visits should be limited if possible.

York Region medical officer of health, Dr. Helena Jaczek, said her unit is concerned about Norwalk because the virus is "incredibly transmissible."

164 CASES IN YORK

The region had 164 confirmed cases last year.

The virus affects only humans and spreads through exposure to infected people or contaminated food or water and is passed in stool and vomit.

The best way of preventing the transmission of the virus among the general public is to wash hands thoroughly after using the toilet, handling diapers and before preparing food. Patients should also be isolated to help prevent the spread of the virus.

However, Dr. Schabas warned taking precautions doesn't rule out contracting Norwalk.

"I would like to be able to say if you do everything right, you're safe from infection, but that's not the case."



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