



Gastrointestinal Illness Alert

March 21, 2024

The NPS Office of Public Health has recently received increasing reports of gastrointestinal (GI) illness among hikers along the Appalachian Trail in areas of Georgia and Tennessee. Symptoms include **nausea, stomach cramping/pain, vomiting, and diarrhea**. While we do not have a definitive laboratory-based diagnosis currently, these symptoms are often caused by norovirus.

Sometimes called the "stomach bug", norovirus is transmitted through direct contact with an infected person, contaminated food and water, and by touching contaminated surfaces and then eating or touching your face. Norovirus and other GI illnesses cause sudden onset of vomiting and diarrhea that is very contagious and spreads quickly. The best ways to prevent GI illnesses are good hand washing, handling and preparing food safely, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, and protection of drinking water.

We are investigating the circumstances surrounding these illnesses and are working with parks, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and other local entities to prevent further transmission. We ask that hikers do the following to prevent illness:

- Stay away from others when sick. If you are ill or have been ill within the last 72 hours, limit contact and avoid preparing food for others.
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, particularly before and after using the toilet and before eating meals. **Hand sanitizer does not work well against norovirus and should only be used in addition to thorough handwashing.** Norovirus can be found in vomit or feces before an individual feels ill and for up to two weeks after recovery.
- Dispose of human waste properly by using disposable toilet bags ("wag bags") to carry out and dispose of waste in a trash receptacle off-trail. If toilet bags are not available, dig a hole 6-8 inches deep and at least 200 feet from the trail and from water sources. Cover the waste when finished.
- Filter **and** disinfect drinking water. **Point-of-use filters alone will not remove norovirus and other pathogens from water.** Alternatively, bring water to a rolling boil for at least one minute to disinfect. Information on backcountry water treatment can be found here: https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/drinking/travel/backcountry_water_treatment.html
- Avoid sharing food and drinks and putting your hands into shared food sources. Avoid touching commonly touched surfaces such as water dispenser nozzles.

Additional information is available at: www.cdc.gov/norovirus.

For questions, concerns, and to report an illness, please contact the NPS Office of Public Health Epidemiology Branch at publichealthprogram@nps.gov.