



Canadian Institute of Child Health
Institut canadien de la santé infantile

NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

THE CANADIAN INSTITUTE OF CHILD HEALTH CONDUCTS NATIONAL SURVEY ON ROTAVIRUS

OTTAWA, Ontario – May 17, 2007 – Many Canadian mothers with young children are unfamiliar with rotavirus, according to a new nationwide survey conducted by the Canadian Institute of Child Health (CICH). Rotavirus is an unpredictable, highly contagious and potentially serious virus which peaks in April/May in Canada.¹ CICH is working to help Canadian parents become better informed about rotavirus and its prevention, including recognizing its symptoms and the signs of dehydration, as well as the importance of hand washing.

“Rotavirus is highly contagious and anyone, particularly infants and young children, can become infected at any time,” said Dr. C. Robin Walker, a member of the CICH Board of Directors and a Full Professor of Pediatrics at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. “The virus is typically transmitted from person to person, through fecal-oral contact with contaminated hands and objects, so it is important for parents to monitor symptoms related to rotavirus.”

A common but misunderstood disease

According to the survey of 822 Canadian mothers aged between 20 and 45 years with at least one child under age three:

- Most (52 per cent) have never heard of rotavirus, Canada’s leading cause of dehydration and hospitalization due to gastroenteritis in children;¹
- One in six (18%) Canadian parents report that their youngest child has had the symptoms of rotavirus either once or twice;
- A majority rated the potential symptoms of rotavirus as some of the most serious that could affect their child—96 per cent surveyed think that diarrhea is a serious or very serious symptom and 97 per cent believe forceful vomiting with increased frequency is also a serious or very serious symptom.

Symptoms can be serious

Symptoms of rotavirus vary but typically include fever, upset stomach, and vomiting, in conjunction with watery diarrhea. Children with rotavirus can have multiple episodes of diarrhea per day, that can last for three to nine days. Diarrhea, when combined with frequent vomiting, can lead to dehydration, and hospitalization.

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One in five parents surveyed said their youngest child had experienced five or more episodes of watery diarrhea in one day. "Young children can become dehydrated very quickly," said Dr. Janine Flanagan, a practising Toronto emergency room physician and member of the CICH project advisory group. "It can be very frightening for parents to see their child become so sick, so fast."

Good hygiene practices, including hand washing, can help to prevent the spread of rotavirus. An oral vaccine is also available as a prevention option for infants against those strains of rotavirus responsible for approximately 95 per cent of the disease in Canada.

Economic impact of rotavirus

Affecting all socioeconomic groups, rotavirus is equally prevalent in industrialized and developing countries, so differences in sanitation practices or water supply are not likely to affect the incidence of the infection.² Rotavirus affects 95 per cent of all children at least once by the age of five³ and one in four Canadian children who visit a doctor with a rotavirus infection require emergency room care or hospitalization.¹

Each year in Canada, rotavirus is responsible for:^{4, 5}

- About 7,000 hospitalizations, 27,000 ER visits and 56,000 physician visits;
- Costs to the health care system of up to \$17 million;
- An estimated \$46 million in societal costs, taking into account out of pocket costs and work days—on average, parents miss 1.6 days to take care of their children for each rotavirus episode.

"Rotavirus has a significant cost impact to the Canadian healthcare system," said Dr. John Yaremko, member of the CICH project advisory group and a practising pediatrician based in Montreal. "The survey showed that ten per cent of parents took their youngest child to a doctor because of rotavirus gastroenteritis and five per cent had at least one child stay overnight in hospital because of it. Since rotavirus is so contagious, I've often seen other family members experience at least one symptom, and much of the time it's an adult."

Education is needed

CICH will be distributing brochures about rotavirus and its prevention to regional health centres and hospitals across the country. Parents can also consult the CICH Web site (www.cich.ca) for more information and to obtain a copy of the brochure.

"Results of the survey confirm what I've experienced in my practice. Parents need to be better informed about rotavirus and its symptoms," added Dr. Darryl Ableman, a general practitioner based in Coquitlam, British Columbia and a member of the CICH project advisory group. "Close to 350,000 babies were born in Canada over the past year and we want to make sure that as many as possible reach their fifth birthdays without serious complications from a virus such as rotavirus if possible."

The nationwide survey which looked at rotavirus awareness, immunization practices and parent education was conducted by IPSOS on behalf of CICH in March 2007. Results were obtained by means of a Web survey completed by 822 women between the ages of 20 and 45 with at least one child under the age of three. With a sample of this size, the results are considered accurate to within ± 3.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire population of mothers aged 20 to 45, with at least one child under the age of three, been polled. Results were weighted by age group and region, according to the most recent census statistics in order to obtain a representative sample of the target population in Canada.

The CICH rotavirus awareness survey and education campaign is made possible through an unrestricted educational grant from Merck Frosst Canada Ltd.

CICH

The Canadian Institute of Child Health (CICH) is the only national charitable organization dedicated solely to improving the health of children and youth in Canada. Founded in 1977, CICH has a successful history of developing and implementing initiatives to increase public understanding and awareness of child health issues through health promotion programs, child health monitoring, education and advocacy.

References:

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5. Sénécal M, Brisson M, Lebel MH et al. for the MIRAGE study group. Burden of rotavirus associated gastroenteritis in Canadian families: a prospective community based study. Presented at the 24th Annual Meeting of the European Society for Paediatric Infectious Diseases, May 3-5, 2006, Basel, Switzerland: (poster)

- 30 -

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