



Emerging and Reemerging Infectious Diseases, Region of the Americas

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Outbreak of Diarrheic Rotavirus Disease in Guatemala

Over the past few weeks, Guatemala has reported to PAHO the existence of an outbreak of diarrheic disease. The outbreak began last month; based on information dated 31 January 2004, it has affected 28,255 people, of whom 17,032 are under five years of age.

Laboratory analyses carried out both in hospitals and by the various areas of the Ministry of Health, as well as the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security (*Instituto de Guatemala del Seguro Social* / IGSS) have identified rotavirus in 15%–60% of the samples taken.

During the first three weeks of the outbreak, the increase in relation to 2003 was 9%, falling to 4% in the fourth week. The outbreak has affected above all the health districts of Ixcán, Petén Sur Oriente and Escuintla, but has also spread to Guatemala, Sacatepéquez, Suchitepéquez, Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, El Progreso and Zacapa.

Since the beginning of February, the country has carried out continuous monitoring of hospital admissions, which have averaged 250 per day. This monitoring—along with declaring a state of national epidemiological alert and strengthening information, education and communication—has resulted in a greater demand for care and subsequently in the number of reported cases.

Prevention and control measures have been taken with regard to strengthening surveillance of detected cases and identifying risk groups, and increasing awareness among health-care professionals at all levels with a view to the early detection and proper treatment of diarrheic syndrome and dehydration.

In addition, there has been a review and strengthening of more structural aspects such as intra- and intersectoral coordination, internal and mass communication, and the existence of contingency plans as well as of medicines and other supplies necessary to respond to this type of emergency.

The rotavirus transmission is mainly transmitted via fecal-oral contact. The virus is stable in the environment and can remain viable for long periods of time. This permits transmission

from contact with contaminated surfaces, water, or food. It is important for prevention and control measures to take these aspects into account.

There is no specific treatment for the disease. Two vaccines are currently being tested (Phase III trials), with promising preliminary results in terms of efficacy and safety. The principal strategy for dealing with such outbreaks consists of minimizing the mortality caused by dehydration as a result of the diarrheic syndrome. Approximately 1 out of every 40 children with gastroenteritis caused by rotavirus will require hospitalization and therapy providing fluids intravenously. Compliance with the oral-rehydration standards set by the global WHO strategy for *Integrated Management of Childhood Illness* (IMCI) is extremely important in these cases.

For more information, see the PAHO pages on [IMCI](#) and on [Diarrheal/Enteric Diseases](#).

Sources

- Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance of Guatemala, Epidemiology, Last Epidemiological Week, *Epidemiological Bulletin of Guatemala*, Epidemiological Week No. 4, 25–31 January 2004, pp. 1–2 and 4–6 ([Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social de Guatemala](#), Epidemiología, Última Semana Epidemiológica, *Boletín epidemiológico de Guatemala*, Semana epidemiológica No. 4-2004, 25–31 enero 2004, pp. 1–2 y 4–6; in Spanish).
- Report to PAHO from Ministry of Health of Guatemala.