

To : Editors & Health Journalists

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It's Rotavirus season – protect your child by vaccinating them and watching for signs of dehydration

Our surveillance indicates that the 2026 rotavirus season is ongoing across South Africa, and we have noted a sharp increase in rotavirus cases in Pretoria, with one fatality reported. We encourage all parents to vaccinate their children against rotavirus and to continue breastfeeding infants or administer oral rehydration solution (6 teaspoons of sugar and half a teaspoon of salt in 1 litre of clean water) to infants and children with diarrhoeal symptoms.

Rotavirus is a common childhood diarrhoeal infection that has a seasonal pattern, peaking during the cooler, drier months of the year. Most children have at least one infection by two years of age. The virus is transmitted via the faecal-oral route. "Clinical symptoms include the sudden onset of vomiting followed by non-bloody watery diarrhoea, which may result in severe life-threatening dehydration. Fever may occur in approximately 30-50% of patients. Associated symptoms include loss of appetite (anorexia), lethargy, and mild abdominal discomfort," said Prof. Nicola Page, head of the Centre for Enteric Diseases at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.

Since the rotavirus vaccine was introduced into the expanded programme of immunisation in August 2009, the annual rotavirus season in South Africa typically occurs from July to August and may extend into September.

Diarrhoeal syndromic surveillance is conducted at five sites as part of the [GERMS-SA](#) platform (Pelonomi Hospital, Free State; Klerksdorp/Tshepong hospitals, North West; Red Cross Children's Hospital, Western Cape; Kabokweni Clinic, Mpumalanga and Kalafong Hospital, Gauteng). The surveillance targets all patients presenting for the treatment of diarrhoea at participating sites.

"Parents should also watch for signs of early to moderate dehydration, including no tears, dry mouth, sunken soft spot or eyes, fewer wet nappies (no wet nappy for previous 6-8 hours), and behaviour changes like unusual fussiness, listlessness and lethargy or refusal to eat or drink. In these children, parents could increase fluid intake or, if concerned, proceed to the nearest clinic or health facility," warned Prof. Page.

Children with severe dehydration may become excessively sleepy or limp, produce dark urine, have cold or discoloured skin, exhibit fast breathing or heartbeat and their

skin will form a tent when pinched and be slow to return to normal. Severe dehydration is a medical emergency, and these children should be taken to the nearest medical facility or clinic immediately, administering oral rehydration solution on the way, if possible. Prompt recognition of dehydration and rapid treatment will prevent prolonged hospitalisation, complications and even death.

For more information about rotavirus, visit the NICD website [here](#).

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