

Winter vomiting bug closes hundreds of wards as cases hit a FIVE-YEAR high

- **New figures show number of cases 72 per cent higher than last December**
- **More than 300 hospital wards in England and Wales have been closed to new patients since outbreak began**
- **A total of 43 have been shut in the past two weeks alone**
- **Schools across the UK have been affected, with one south-west London primary reporting 'unprecedented' numbers of pupils off sick**

By Anna Hodgekiss

Hundreds of hospital wards have been forced to close due to the spread of the winter vomiting bug, as fears grow that this winter's outbreak could prove to be the worst on record.

New figures released yesterday by the Health Protection Agency revealed cases of the bug are at a five-year high - with more than two-thirds as many people struck down this year as during the same period in 2011.

In the past week, schools from Plymouth to Fife have been forced to close after soaring numbers of children have fallen victim to the highly contagious norovirus.

Cases of norovirus have risen to a five-year high, according to the Health Protection Agency, which says the slight dip in the last week does NOT mean the virus is abating

A total of 335 hospital wards in England and Wales have been closed to new visitors since the start of this year's outbreak - with 43 shut down in the past fortnight alone.

And as well as norovirus, there are numerous other vicious bugs going around. Yesterday at Wimbledon Chase Primary School in south west London, 140 of the 639 pupils were off sick. Staff said the number was unprecedented.

The huge early outbreak is thought to represent the worst start to the norovirus season on record, with some experts blaming particularly frigid November temperatures for the staggering numbers of cases.

The new HPA figures show there have been 2,630 confirmed cases - where samples have been checked in the lab - since July.

More...

- At least 150 cruise passengers struck down by winter vomiting bug on P&O luxury liner
- A chance of fever, aches and headaches... How scientists could soon be giving a FLU forecast

This is 72 per cent higher than the same period in the last season when there were 1,533 cases reported. But this figure is likely to be only a fraction of the true total as most sufferers do not see their GP. Officials at the HPA estimate that for every confirmed case there are another 288 in the community. There has been a slight dip in cases in the last week or two but an HPA spokesperson said this was no indication the virus was tapering off, particularly as the vast majority of cases in the community go unreported. Some experts say the highly contagious virus has arrived early this year and caught the NHS 'unawares'. Infections tend to peak in January and February. But this year's early outbreak could go on to see this norovirus season become the worst on record.

Experts say the virus has arrived earlier than usual this year and caught the NHS 'unawares'

In Scotland, parents have even been banned from nativity shows at one Midlothian school. More than a quarter of the 400 children at Mauricewood primary school near Edinburgh have been struck down in the suspected norovirus outbreak. Several teachers have also been affected. Few have escaped the clutches of the virus. In Coventry, a bride and groom were among 40 guests taken ill after their wedding reception. Just five people at Michael and Natalie Frost's party at the Chace Hotel, in Willenhall, on Saturday, were not struck down by a stomach bug. Several members of staff have also been affected.

The cause of the crippling bout of sickness and diarrhoea is now being investigated by environmental health officers from Coventry City Council. But hotel bosses emphatically deny the food was to blame and said it was caused by the contagious winter

vomiting

bug.

Dozens of hospitals have also been forced to close their wards.

Unprecedented: At Wimbledon Chase Primary school in south west London (pictured), 140 of the 639 pupils were off sick with the bug yesterday

In Staffordshire, four wards have been closed to new patients after an outbreak at the county's biggest hospital. The restrictions mean up to 80 beds at the 1,100-bed University Hospital of North Staffordshire are out of action and unable to take emergency cases from its overstretched A&E unit. In Scotland, three wards at Dumfries Infirmary have been closed to new admissions. The outbreak is the second in a matter of weeks at the hospital, where 38 patients and 14 staff have been affected.

And in Plymouth, three wards have been closed after the bug struck Derriford Hospital. The norovirus has even hit passengers on board a luxury cruise ship for a festive tour of Europe's Christmas markets.

At least 150 of the almost 2,000 holidaymakers sailing on P&O's Oriana are reported to have been taken ill.

IF YOU SUSPECT YOU HAVE NOROVIRUS...

The Health Protection Agency advises the following measures:

Do NOT visit your GP surgery or local A&E Unit. Norovirus infection is a self-limiting illness and you will recover naturally without treatment. It is, however, important to take plenty of drinks to replace lost fluids.

Use NHS Direct's new diarrhoea and vomiting online health and symptom checker, to get advice on how to manage your symptoms at home or help to access the most appropriate health service visit the NHS Direct website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/CheckSymptoms/SATs/DandV5AndOver.aspx

Wash hands thoroughly and regularly at all times, but particularly after using the toilet and before eating.

Do not visit friends or relatives in hospitals or residential care homes as there is a real risk that you would introduce the infection putting vulnerable people at risk.

One passenger, who claimed crew members had ignored the plight of those stricken by the bug, described the trip as 'a cruise to hell'. Dr Bob Adak, head of the gastrointestinal diseases department at the HPA said: 'The norovirus season is always completely unpredictable as it peaks and falls over several months – usually October to April. However, one thing we do know is that every year we will see a large amount of norovirus activity because it is highly contagious.' The bug can be transmitted by contact with an infected person, by consuming contaminated food or water or by contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. The virus spreads rapidly in closed environments such as hospitals, schools, nursing and residential homes. Its symptoms include a sudden onset of vomiting and/or diarrhoea. Some people may have a temperature, headache and stomach cramps. The illness usually resolves in one or two days and there are no long-term effects.