

b Investigation of food- and water-borne illness outbreaks.

On account of summer high temperatures and ongoing water supply problems, an increase in the number of food-borne and water-borne illness outbreaks can be anticipated. According to the South African Health Act, 1977 (Act No. 63 of 1977), 'food poisoning, defined as an occurrence of gastro-intestinal symptoms (vomiting, diarrhoea or abdominal pain) amongst two or more persons who have an epidemiological link', is a notifiable medical condition. The following actions are required to facilitate appropriate and timeous investigation of these events:

1. If a food- or water-borne outbreak is suspected, attending health care workers should notify the person in charge of infection control at the facility, or notify the district Communicable Diseases Co-ordinator and the district Environmental Health services as soon as possible.

2. Attending clinicians should ensure that appropriate clinical specimens from the patients are taken, and submitted to the correct NHLS laboratory. Contact details of NHLS public health laboratories are listed below. Ensure that specimens are clearly labelled so that NHLS couriers deliver specimens to the correct laboratory. Clinicians and Communicable Disease Co-ordinators should retain the NHLS bar-code label in order to trace specimens.

- If patients are vomiting, retain specimens of vomitus for laboratory testing
- If patients are complaining of diarrhoea, obtain stool specimens for laboratory testing.
- Blood is not a helpful specimen for investigation of food- or water-borne outbreaks.

4. Environmental Health Officers or Communicable Diseases Co-ordinators should complete a case investigation form for each affected person (see www.nicd.ac.za) and collect specimens of food served at the implicated event, or water if the source is suspected to be water-borne. These should be submitted to the correct NHLS laboratory (Table 1).

5. Finally, an analysis of the data obtained from patient interviews and results of clinical specimens and environmental samples should be conducted. A possible cause for the outbreak should be identified, and appropriate steps taken to prevent future food- or water-borne disease.

The NICD has employed an epidemiologist in each province to assist provincial and district teams with epidemiological data analysis and outbreak investigation. Contact details of provincial epidemiologists are listed in Table 2. Outbreak investigation is a critically important activity that monitors and safeguards public health. Prompt notification will ensure that investigations are done properly and timeously. Alternatively, health care workers can call the NICD hotline for advice on 0828839920, or email outbreak@nicd.ac.za

Source: Division of Public Health, Surveillance and Response, Centre for Enteric Diseases, NICD-NHLS (outbreak@nicd.ac.za)

Table 1. Contact details of NHLS public health laboratories for processing of clinical and environmental samples obtained during investigation of food- and water-borne outbreaks

Name of laboratory	Address	Contact person
NHLS Infection Control Service Laboratory, Johannesburg	Wits Medical School, room 3T09, 7 York Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193	Mr Rob Stewart. 011-489-8578/9
NHLS Public Health Laboratory, Kwa-Zulu-Natal	3 rd floor, 149 Prince Street, Durban, 4001	Ms Inderani Chetty, Mr Leon Taylor 031-327-6743
NHLS Public Health Laboratory, Port Elizabeth	Corner of Buckingham and Eastborne Road, Mount Croix, Port Elizabeth, 6000.	Ms Vanessa Pearce 041-395-6174

Table 1. Contact details of NICD provincial epidemiologists

Province	Name	Cell	Email
National	Portia Mutevedzi	0826580140	portiamu@nicd.ac.za
Eastern Cape	Riyadh Manesen	0826049701	riyadh@nicd.ac.za
Free State	Motshabi Modise	0826163642	motshabim@nicd.ac.za
Gauteng	Joy Ebonwu	0824005588	joye@nicd.ac.za
KwaZulu-Natal	<i>not yet filled</i>		
Limpopo	Ntsieni Ramalwa	0729779183	NtsieniR@nicd.ac.za
Mpumalanga	Hlupi Mpangane	0765228511	doreenm@nicd.ac.za
North West	Thejane Motladiile	0828945030	thejanem@nicd.ac.za
Northern Cape	<i>not yet filled</i>		
Western Cape	Hlengani Mathema	0731774735	hlenganim@nicd.ac.za