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No Reservations

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CDC Report: Restaurants Can Help Prevent Norovirus

CDC Report: Restaurants Can Help Prevent Norovirus Outbreaks
By Lydia Zuraw | June 4, 2014

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that there are 19-21 million cases of norovirus infections each year. Food is a vehicle for about 5.5 million cases, and the agency believes that improved food safety is an important part of reducing norovirus infections.

This week, CDC issued a report on the latest statistics for norovirus disease and what the food service industry can do to prevent outbreaks from contaminated food.

Between 2009 and 2012, there were 4,318 norovirus outbreaks reported to CDC's National Outbreak Reporting System (NORS). Slightly more than 1,000 of them were linked to food, mostly from restaurants or catering facilities.

Norovirus is the top cause of foodborne illness in the U.S. Of foodborne outbreaks in which a single cause was identified, 48 percent were caused by norovirus.

Healthcare settings are the most common means of transmission for non-foodborne norovirus.

While outbreaks on cruise ships may get most of the press, these incidents only account for about 1 percent of all reported outbreaks. Infected workers who touch ready-to-eat foods with their bare hands are usually the source of foodborne norovirus. The report notes that, while it is possible for norovirus to contaminate foods commonly eaten raw – for example, mollusks or fresh produce – most contamination happens during preparation.

CDC's key recommendations for avoiding contamination including proper handwashing, use of utensils and single-use gloves when handling ready-to-eat foods, training and certifying kitchen managers, and requiring sick workers to stay at home until at least 48 hours after symptoms subside.

That last one may be difficult for workers who don't want to leave their coworkers understaffed or fear they might lose their job if they take sick days. The report notes that one in five restaurant workers have reported working at least once in the previous year while sick with vomiting or diarrhea.

Aron Hall of CDC's Division of Viral Disease suggests that businesses might consider measures to encourage sick workers to stay home "such as paid sick leave and a staffing plan that includes on-call workers." As for proper handwashing, the new report cites an observational study in restaurants which found that food workers only washed their hands in 27 percent of activities for which it's recommended. When wearing gloves, they only washed their hands 16 percent of the time.

"Although candidate norovirus vaccines are in development and show promise, behavioral interventions focused on food workers continue to be a primary means to prevent foodborne norovirus," the report concludes.

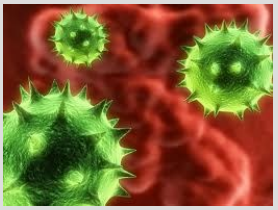
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Pathogen Spotlight: Norovirus

Many people may not realize that norovirus is the leading cause of illness from contaminated foods in the United States. In 2012, a new strain of norovirus, named GII.4 Sydney, was detected in Australia. While all strains of norovirus are highly contagious, GII.4 Sydney appears to be particularly easy to spread. It is not yet known whether the new strain will cause more norovirus illness than in other years. However, it is an opportune time to remind foodservice workers about the importance of proper hand hygiene and not working while experiencing vomiting or diarrhea.

Food handlers who are sick with norovirus can easily spread the illness person to person or by contaminating food and drink they touch. In fact, people with norovirus are not only contagious while they are experiencing symptoms but also during the first 3 days after recovery. Therefore, to protect spreading this illness, it is critical that foodservice workers follow the exclude/restrict health policies of their establishment while they are experiencing symptoms and for 3 days thereafter. Of course, appropriate hand hygiene is critical for prevention of norovirus infection and for controlling transmission. Yet, be advised that the efficacy of alcohol-based and other hand sanitizers against norovirus remains controversial; hence, anyone handling food should always wash their hands with warm, running water and soap.

Anyone who works in the foodservice industry needs to know about norovirus. For the sake of public health, foodservice workers must understand and appreciate the importance of not handling food while sick and always practicing scrupulous hand hygiene.



References:
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Prevent the spread of norovirus. http://m.cdc.gov/en/Features/norovirus
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Norovirus for food handlers. http://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/food-handlers/work-with-food.html.

Mexican Restaurant, Russellville, AL. June 2014

Fourteen confirmed Salmonella cases have been confirmed by the Alabama Department of Public Health as part of their investigation into a foodborne disease outbreak at a Russellville, AL, restaurant. Two people were hospitalized after testing positive but have since been released.

A department statement noted that, as of Friday, the Mexican restaurant remained closed. Inspectors reportedly visited the restaurant on June 11 and 12 and issued an emergency order to cease operations based on a "potentially imminent health hazard." Several people who had reported gastrointestinal illnesses after eating at the restaurant on June 4 and 5 were interviewed by health department officials.

Salmonella symptoms usually happen within six to 72 hours after infection, and most people recover without treatment. Symptoms include diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, abdominal cramping and fever.

Assistant State Health Officer Dr. Karen Landers recommended that people reduce their risk of Salmonella by avoiding raw or undercooked eggs, poultry or other meats, thoroughly washing produce, and following safe food handling practices during food preparation.

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Mexican Food Bar, Bentonville, AK. June 2014

The Arkansas Department of Health has traced an outbreak of Shigellosis affecting dozens of people to a cafeteria at a supermarket chain headquarters in Bentonville, AR.

Officials indicated the likely source was a Mexican food bar operated in the cafeteria. "So far that does seem to be where most people say that they had eaten before they became ill," said the state health department.

The Mexican food bar was reportedly closed for a time while the supermarket chain and the Benton County Health Department investigated the situation. The entire cafeteria was disinfected, including all kitchen and dining areas.

Shigellosis is a highly contagious bacterial infection typically transmitted by people who don't wash their hands after using the restroom or changing diapers. Symptoms include diarrhea (often bloody), fever and stomach cramps which appear within a day or two of exposure. The symptoms usually resolve within five to seven days, and those infected are rarely hospitalized.

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Hot Dog Mobile Food Facility, Ventura County, CA. June 2014

The mobile food facility was closed down by the Ventura County Health Department due to an unapproved liquid waste disposal system, and failure to use an approved commissary. The mobile unit was closed for two days.

http://www.ventura.org







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