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Cruising Along: Norovirus, Not Just on Cruise Ships

By Pete Peterson
03/17/2005

There is a misconception that the norovirus (previously known as "Norwalk-like viruses" or "NLV") is contracted only on cruise ships. This could not be further from the truth.

Unfortunately, a large number of people can contract norovirus on a ship in a relatively short time frame and because cruise companies are required to report such incidents, an outbreak always draws an abundance of media attention.

However, according to Dave Forney, chief of the Vessel Sanitation Program of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, norovirus incidents are increasing across the country in hospitals, day-care centers, nursing homes and schools.

The CDC estimates that 23 million people in the United States, or 8 percent of the U.S. population, contract norovirus every year. Annually, less than 1 percent of all cruise ship passengers have been affected by norovirus.

Symptoms of the illness include diarrhea, vomiting and stomach cramps, which may last from one to two days. The most common method of transmission is through person-to-person contact.

According to Forney, cruise lines have taken a leadership role in addressing norovirus, the second most prevalent illness in the United States behind the common cold.

"Cruise ships have rigorous protocols and procedures in place to manage and eradicate transmission of norovirus," Forney said. "In addition to being held to the highest sanitation standards in the world, cruise lines have worked meticulously and effectively to actually break the cycle of transmission during most cruises, which requires a lot of effort and expertise."

Rigorous procedures are in place to disinfect and sanitize public areas, including door handles, railings and elevator buttons. Passengers are encouraged to wash their hands frequently, and hand sanitizers are offered on some ships. Passengers are encouraged to minimize their contact with others during the period when the illness is likely to be passed on.

"We want to educate passengers as to measures they can take to effectively prevent this temporary but uncomfortable condition," said Michael Crye, president of the International Council of Cruise Lines (ICCL).

"The most preventative measure people can take is washing their hands frequently," Crye added. "If they are experiencing symptoms, they should follow the medical staff's recommendations to prevent the spread of illness."

"The reason you hear about norovirus on cruise ships is because they are required to report every incidence of gastrointestinal illness," Forney said. "Nowhere else in the public health system of the United States is norovirus a reportable illness."

"Norovirus is not a cruise-ship illness but an illness commonly seen in many settings throughout the United States," Forney noted.

Travel by plane, train, bus and cruise ship congregates large groups of people from different parts of the United States and the world. In such settings, diseases can easily spread from person-to-person contact (for example, measles, rubella, certain respiratory illnesses such as influenza, and certain gastrointestinal illnesses such as norovirus infection). It just becomes more apparent on a cruise ship because people are together



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for several days instead of just a few hours as in the case of an airplane.

It is also important to note that certain diseases can be transmitted before symptoms are apparent, and some people who become ill while on a cruise ship may have been infected prior to travel.

The bottom line is that you should not let this keep you from traveling. Just make sure you take the necessary precautions and thoroughly wash your hands frequently with warm water and lots of soap. There are some very good disposable wipes on the market to sanitize your hands and can be carried with you when traveling.

But understand that contracting such contagious diseases is not just limited to cruise ships or to traveling in general. You can also get them in everyday life simply by touching something like an elevator button, door knob or hand railing, and then rubbing your eyes or nose.

Pete Peterson is a cruise specialist with Cruise Planners Inc. To contact Peterson, e-mail him at dreams@storybookcruises.com, or call 703-858-9898 or 866-786-7926.

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