

Norwalk Virus Gives Cruise Ships A Bad Rap

By Roy Witman

Every year you hear about it: Reports of the mysterious and highly contagious Norwalk virus breaking out onboard cruise ships. The reports are so widespread that this virus has actually been deemed the "cruise ship virus." However, what most people don't realize is that there is nothing mysterious about this pesky bug. You might be surprised to know that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) clearly state that Norwalk virus (a.k.a. cruise ship virus) is really just the plain, old, ordinary stomach flu.

Why all the commotion then? Because having Norwalk virus onboard a cruise ship can be serious business due to the confined space. However, just as when this virus shows up in other confined areas (such as nursing homes, schools, summer camps, daycare facilities and even hospitals) there are steps that can be taken to help control the spread and limit the outbreak.

Cruise Ships Are On the Ball

While Norwalk virus can't grow outside the body, it can live and be spread outside the body. In accordance with CDC guidelines, immediately upon recognition of Norwalk virus, cruise ship staff begins to frequently spray chairs and hand rails with a bleach solution that will kill the virus. Elevator buttons are sprayed with a disinfectant every five minutes (literally) and passengers are encouraged to wash and sanitize their hands frequently, especially if they have symptoms.

In addition, the food handlers onboard are extra vigilant with cleanliness in virus-related circumstances. For instance, self-serve buffets are served by gloved ship employees instead of passengers. Employees who handle food are also required to wash their hands frequently.

Norwalk virus can be caused by seafood harvested from contaminated waters or from produce contaminated in the fields. For this reason cruise ships are particularly careful about the sources of food they bring onboard as well as the washing of all produce.

What Is Norwalk Virus?

As mentioned previously, Norwalk virus is simply the stomach flu. This virus (like all other viruses) is not treatable with antibiotics. It must run its course. Fortunately, the course is usually short, lasting 1 - 2 days on average. As you might expect, Norwalk virus brings on vomiting and diarrhea and sometimes nausea, stomach cramps, fever and chills. It usually appears suddenly and without warning.

The greatest danger with Norwalk virus is dehydration. It's important to try and drink as much as possible to prevent dehydration. Children and the elderly should be watched very closely and taken to a hospital or other medical facility for I.V. fluids if they're unable to keep liquids down.

What Can You Do?

Whether you're at home or at sea, if stomach flu strikes, the CDC recommends:

- Frequently washing your hands, especially after toilet visits, changing adult or children's diapers, or cleaning up vomit. It's imperative to wash your hands before preparing food.
- Carefully wash produce and steam oysters and other seafood before eating.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces immediately after contact with diarrhea or vomit with a bleach-based cleanser.
- Immediately wash clothing and linens that may be contaminated with hot water and soap.
- Flush or discard any vomit or stools in the toilet and make sure the surface and surrounding areas are cleaned with a bleach-based cleanser.

Norwalk virus is not exclusive to cruise ships. In fact, ships have the same likelihood of virus outbreaks as any other confined area. If you've been putting off taking a cruise for fear of getting Norwalk virus, don't. Your chances are no greater than catching it common places you visit every day.

About the Author

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