

Suspected Norovirus Gastroenteritis Associated with a Restaurant

February

Dakota County

On March 4, 2011, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) foodborne illness hotline received three independent complaints of gastrointestinal illness from individuals who had attended birthday parties at a restaurant in Burnsville on February 25 and 26. Two of the complainants attended the same party, from which 10 of 12 attendees had reportedly become ill with vomiting and/or diarrhea. The third complainant attended a separate party, from which 4 of 12 party attendees had reportedly become ill. One of the complainants reported that when they had called the establishment to report their illness, the employee they spoke with informed them that several employees had also been sick with similar symptoms. MDH Environmental Health Services (EHS) was notified and an investigation was initiated.

A list of party attendees of one of the birthday parties was obtained from the party organizer; attempts to contact the organizer of the other party were unsuccessful. Epidemiologists from MDH interviewed birthday party attendees about food/beverage consumption and illness history. A case was defined as a restaurant patron who subsequently developed vomiting and/or diarrhea (≥ 3 loose stools in a 24-hour period).

A sanitarian from MDH EHS spoke with the manager of the establishment to assess employee illness and implement control measures.

Illness histories and exposure information were obtained from 10 restaurant patrons. Nine (90%) cases were identified. One person reported illness but did not meet the case definition, and thus was excluded from further analyses. No patrons agreed to stool testing.

Six (67%) cases reported diarrhea, five (56%) reported vomiting, five (56%) reported cramps, and three (33%) reported fever. The median incubation period was 37 hours (range, 24 to 49 hours). The median duration of illness was 59 hours (range, 27 to 107 hours) for the four cases who had recovered at the time of interview.

Due to the limited menu and lack of non-ill controls, a meaningful statistical analysis could not be performed. Foods consumed by the patrons included pizza, soda, water, ice, and brownies. The brownies were brought in by a patron but were cut and served by restaurant employees.

In discussions with an EHS sanitarian, the manager confirmed that a number of employees had been sick with vomiting and/or diarrhea with onsets of February 27 and 28, including food workers. At the start of the investigation sanitarians and management established a screening protocol for employee illness. All employees with vomiting and/or diarrhea were excluded from work until 72 hours after the resolution of symptoms. Management reported no known incidents of public vomiting or diarrhea that required clean-up at the establishment. All hard surfaces, including the play area and video game machines, were cleaned with a quaternary sanitizer approved for norovirus. Food workers were re-educated on not handling any food products with bare hands and management was instructed to more strictly monitor handwashing.

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