

Norovirus Gastroenteritis Associated with a Restaurant

January

Ramsey County

On January 10, 2012, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) foodborne illness hotline received a complaint of gastrointestinal illness among a group of five individuals from two households who ate lunch at a restaurant in Arden Hills on January 8. Ramsey County Environmental Health (RCEH) was contacted, and an investigation was initiated immediately.

RCEH sanitarians visited the restaurant on January 10 to evaluate food preparation and handling procedures, and to interview food workers. Credit card receipts were not collected as they did not contain patron signatures. A case was defined as a restaurant patron who developed vomiting and/or diarrhea (≥ 3 loose stools in a 24-hour period) after eating at the restaurant. Stool samples collected from consenting restaurant patrons were submitted to the MDH Public Health Laboratory for bacterial and viral testing.

Five restaurant patrons were interviewed, and three (60%) met the case definition. The median incubation period for the cases was 29 hours (range, 24 to 33 hours). Duration of illness information was only available for one case, whose symptoms lasted 13 hours. All three cases reported diarrhea and vomiting, two (67%) reported cramps, and none reported bloody stools or fever. Stool samples submitted by two ill patrons tested positive for norovirus GII.

The limited number of cases and controls prevented a meaningful statistical analysis of specific food exposures. Two cases reported sharing a cheddar and beef sandwich with fries and the third case consumed a chicken sandwich with lettuce, fries, and pop.

RCEH sanitarians interviewed 18 restaurant employees, and 3 reported recent gastrointestinal illness. These employees reported becoming ill on January 4, 7, and 9, respectively. However, none of these employees reported working on January 8. The sanitarian observed good hand hygiene and use of gloves when handling ready-to-eat foods. The restaurant had an employee illness log, but it had not been updated since February of 2011. The sanitarian discussed the importance of handwashing for the prevention of norovirus transmission, and all employees with vomiting and/or diarrhea were excluded from work until 72 hours after the resolution of symptoms.

This was a foodborne outbreak of norovirus gastroenteritis associated with a restaurant in Arden Hills. A specific food vehicle was not identified. The source of the contamination was likely an infected food worker.