

Norovirus Gastroenteritis Associated with a Restaurant

February

Hennepin County

On February 27, 2017, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) foodborne and waterborne illness hotline was forwarded information on two independent complaints made to Restaurant Chain A's website. Both complainants reported eating at the Restaurant Chain A location in Rogers on February 23. Additionally, Restaurant A reported that seven employees had recently reported gastrointestinal illness. One complainant was able to be reached for interview and reported diarrhea and vomiting with onset 33 hours after a meal at the restaurant.

Hennepin County Public Health Epidemiology (HCPH-Epi) and Environmental Health (HCPH-EH) were contacted, and an investigation was initiated.

HCPH-EH sanitarians visited the restaurant on February 27 to interview employees, check the employee illness log, and gather additional patron contact information. A routine inspection had been done 2 days prior to evaluate food preparation and handling.

MDH staff interviewed patrons from the original complaints, and MDH and HCPH epidemiologists interviewed patrons from takeout orders receipts. A case was defined as a Rogers Restaurant A patron who subsequently developed vomiting and/or diarrhea (≥ 3 stools in a 24-hour period) after eating food from the restaurant. A stool sample from a consenting patron was submitted to the MDH Public Health Laboratory for bacterial and viral testing.

Four patrons from the original complaint and 27 patrons identified through online order receipts were interviewed. Twelve individuals met the case definition. An additional ill patron from the complaint was excluded because the onset of illness was >24 hours after the onset of an ill household member. Eleven (92%) cases reported diarrhea, 10 (83%) vomiting, 8 (67%) abdominal cramps, and 6 (50%) fever. No cases were hospitalized or died. The median incubation time from the Restaurant A meal was 36 hours (range, 24 to 48 hours). The median duration of illness was 32 hours (range, 12 to 69 hours) for the eight cases who had recovered by the time of interview.

One ill patron submitted a stool specimen to the MDH PHL, and the specimen was positive for norovirus GII.P16-GII.4 Sydney.

All 11 cases ate cheese, nine (75%) ate chicken, eight (67%) ate burrito bowls and/or white rice, and seven (58%) ate lettuce and/or guacamole. Other foods reported by the cases included: burrito (n=4), barbacoa (n=3), fajita (n=3), brown rice (n=3), black beans (n=2), pinto beans (n=1). No specific food item was statistically associated with illness in a case-control study.

The restaurant has 23 employees, and all were interviewed. Ten employees reported recent gastrointestinal illness. One employee was ill with vomiting and diarrhea on February 13 but did not return to work until February 17. Another had vomiting on February 20 and diarrhea on February 21 and returned to work February 27. One employee reported vomiting on February 24, five employees reported vomiting and diarrhea on February 25, and two employees reported vomiting and/or diarrhea on February 26. None of employees reported working while ill. The facility had an illness log with entries. The 72-hour exclusion policy as well as the daily employee illness screening form were put into place.

During the routine inspection, the sanitarian had not noted any problems with bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat foods or issues with handwashing. It was recommended that the facility clean and sanitize with a product effective against norovirus, keep hand sinks operational and fully-stocked, and continue to maintain employee illness logs with symptom information.

This was a foodborne outbreak of norovirus gastroenteritis associated with the Rogers location of Restaurant Chain A. A specific vehicle was not implicated in the outbreak. An ill or recently ill food worker was the likely source of the illnesses.