

Suspected Viral Gastroenteritis Associated with a Restaurant

February

Chisago County

On February 7, 2017, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) foodborne illness hotline received a complaint of gastrointestinal illness among members of a high school knowledge bowl team. The team had eaten dinner at a restaurant in North Branch on February 3, breakfast at a hotel in North Branch on February 4, and lunch at the competition on February 4. Minnesota Department of Health Environmental Health (EH) was contacted, and an investigation was initiated immediately.

MDH EH sanitarians contacted the restaurant and the hotel by phone on February 7. Restaurant management reported that an employee had called in with vomiting and diarrhea on February 3 while the hotel management reported no recent employee illness. MDH EH visited the restaurant on February 8 to evaluate food preparation and handling procedures, gather additional patron contact information, and interview food workers. A case was defined as a restaurant patron who developed vomiting or diarrhea (≥ 3 loose stools in a 24-hour period) after eating food from the restaurant. Several stool specimen collect kits were sent to cases, but none were returned to MDH.

Seventeen restaurant patrons were interviewed, and six (35%) met the case definition. All six cases were knowledge bowl team members. The median incubation period for cases was 24.5 hours (range, 18.5 to 31.5 hours). All six cases reported diarrhea, five (83%) reported vomiting, two (33%) reported cramps, two (33%) reported fever, and none reported bloody stools. The median duration of illness for the four cases who had recovered at the time of interview was 22 hours (range, 16 hours to 4 days).

Cases and controls reported consuming a variety of breakfast foods, burgers, and dinner entrees. No food items were statistically associated with illness.

MDH EH sanitarians interviewed 22 restaurant employees, and 3 reported recent gastrointestinal illness. A server developed vomiting on January 29 and recovered on January 31. A cook developed vomiting and diarrhea on February 2 and recovered on February 5. A server developed vomiting and diarrhea on February 3 and recovered on February 5. This server worked on February 3 and was a server for the complaint group. Five additional employees reported mild symptoms of nausea, cramping, or fever but did not report vomiting or diarrhea. The sanitarians discussed the importance of handwashing and appropriate glove use for the prevention of norovirus transmission, ordered the restaurant to sanitize all food contact surfaces, instructed management to screen employees for vomiting and diarrhea at the beginning of each shift, and excluded all employees with vomiting and/or diarrhea from work until 72 hours after the resolution of symptoms.

This was a foodborne outbreak of suspected norovirus gastroenteritis associated with a restaurant in North Branch. While an etiology was not confirmed, the incubation periods and symptoms were characteristic of norovirus gastroenteritis. The vehicle was not identified. The source of contamination was likely an infected food worker.