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Suspected Norovirus Outbreak at El Toro Restaurant in Tacoma

by [Edie Jeffers](#) 01/08/2018 4:45 p.m.

UPDATED: 01/11/2018

Update

Jan. 11, 2018, 2:09 p.m.

The Health Department allowed the University Place El Toro Restaurant to reopen this morning after a thorough cleaning and sanitizing. This follows a suspected norovirus outbreak that made 10-15 people sick. We don't yet have an exact number because we have not interviewed all the people who have made illness reports. We continue to receive additional illness reports.

We have confirmed norovirus as the cause of illnesses at the El Toro Restaurant in Tacoma's Westgate neighborhood. We received a positive test result from the state's Public Health Laboratories today for a customer who ate there between Dec. 31 and Jan. 8. Currently 391 cases are connected to the Tacoma location.

About the investigation

The Health Department is working with El Toro to identify the most likely source of norovirus. Through interviews with restaurant staff and customers who got sick, we look for food they handled or ate and areas of contact they have in common.

We know two staff members at the Tacoma location worked while ill during the time customers there dined and later got sick. It's still unclear if the outbreaks at the two locations are connected. Because of the nature of norovirus outbreaks, we may never know the exact affected items that caused illness. We know all the cases have dining at the El Toro Restaurants in common.

Each restaurant makes everything in-house. They make their own salsa from scratch.

For restaurant closures of this type, we always schedule an educational visit where all employees, management, and owners review food safety practices and procedures. We also follow up with an inspection after the educational visit.

We investigate every foodborne illness complaint. If you believe you ate at a food establishment and got sick, contact the Health Department at food@tpchd.org, report online at www.tpchd.org/reportfoodborneillness, or call (253) 798-4712.

Update

Jan. 10, 2018, 3:01 p.m.

The Health Department has more reports of ill customers from the suspected norovirus outbreaks at two El Toro restaurants. We have received reports of 232 ill customers at the Tacoma location and four at the one in University Place. We continue to receive more reports and interview more customers.

If you ate at El Toro Restaurant and became ill, contact the Health Department at food@tpchd.org, report online at www.tpchd.org/reportfoodborneillness, or call (253) 798-4712.

Update

Jan. 9, 2018, 3:50 p.m.

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department has now identified 101 suspected norovirus cases from the El Toro Restaurant outbreak in Tacoma. Food program staff learned of the additional cases when they interviewed 41 customers who reported getting sick at the restaurant between Dec. 31 and Jan. 8. We continue to receive more illness reports.

We interview everyone who makes a report. If you ate at El Toro and became ill, contact the Health Department at food@tpchd.org or www.tpchd.org/reportfoodborneillness.

Look for another update to this blog tomorrow.

Update

Jan. 9, 2018, 11:07 a.m.

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department has now reopened El Toro Restaurant. The Department closed the facility yesterday after a suspected Norovirus outbreak. El Toro has followed sanitizing and cleaning procedures and other preventative measures.

We interviewed staff members to ensure only well people will return to work.

So far, the Department has received illness reports from 41 El Toro customers whose symptoms are consistent with norovirus. The number will likely increase as the Health Department interviews the initial cases, who may have dined with others.

The Health Department will continue to work with El Toro on additional education measures for safe food handling and what to do when employees are sick.

Washington's new paid sick leave law makes it possible for food workers to take care of their health and not work while sick. Learn more about paid sick leave [on the Labor and Industries website](#).

Jan. 8, 2018, 4:45 p.m.

The Health Department is working with El Toro Restaurant, 5716 N. 26th St. in Tacoma, on a suspected norovirus outbreak. We have closed the restaurant for at least 24 hours or until thoroughly cleaned and sanitized.

We received three reports of illness from customers, two reports on Jan. 5 and one report today, Jan. 8. Each report had two cases, totaling six ill people so far, all from separate households.

The three ill parties ate at El Toro on Dec. 31, Jan. 1 and 2. All ill cases experienced the onset of symptoms 24-36 hours after eating. Their symptoms lasted between one and half and two days. We suspect Norovirus as the pathogen.

The patrons ate a variety of meals but all had chips and salsa.

So far, we have identified two restaurant staff members who worked while ill during the time our patrons dined at the restaurant and later became ill. The ill employees can return to the food service establishments 48 hours after they become well.

“The virus spreads easily and is environmentally persistent,” said Katie Lott, food program manager. “Norovirus can stay on objects and surfaces and still infect people for days or weeks,” she said.

When a person is infected with norovirus, he or she can spread the virus up to two weeks after recovering. Handwashing and not touching ready to eat food with bare hands is critical to possibly prevent spreading norovirus further.

“It’s very important that food workers stay home when they are sick so they get well—and keep others from getting sick,” said Lott. “With Washington’s new paid sick leave law, food workers don’t have to be penalized financially for taking care of their health.” Learn more about paid sick leave [on the Labor and Industries website](#).

Norovirus:

- Is highly contagious.
- Causes explosive diarrhea and violent vomiting, often at the same time.
- Is the same virus often related to cruise ship outbreaks.

Cleaning for norovirus

Clean vomit or diarrhea accidents immediately.

Step 1. Remove vomit or poop.

- Pick up the chunks with paper towels or other disposable material.
- Soak up liquids with absorbent materials. Use kitty litter or dry oatmeal for carpeted areas.
- Double bag and discard.
- Do not use a vacuum cleaner.

Step 2. Sanitize.

- Disinfect hard surfaces using 1 2/3 cups of household bleach per gallon of water. Allow for 1 minute of contact time.
- Sanitize all handles and knobs in your house with the bleach solution.
- Linens (including clothing, towels, napkins): Wash separately in hot water and dry on high.
- Steam clean carpets using the highest setting for heat.
- Avoid cross-contamination (use separate sanitation cloths for bathroom and other surfaces).
- Clean and disinfect all containers used (e.g., buckets).

Handwashing

Wash hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. Especially after cleaning, restroom use and before eating.

If you ate at El Toro Restaurant and became ill, please call the Health Department at (253) 798-4712 or report online at www.tpchd.org/reportfoodborneillness.

Learn more about norovirus at www.tpchd.org/norovirus. Sign up for restaurant closures at www.tpchd.org/notify.

1. UPDATED: 01/12/2018
2. UPDATED: 01/11/2018
3. UPDATED: 01/10/2018
4. UPDATED: 01/09/2018

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