



April 29, 2013

Illness that sickened hundreds at Hilton Westchester linked to norovirus

By Jane Lerner

The number of people sickened at the Hilton Westchester a week ago appears to be in the hundreds as health officials try to determine what caused the intestinal illness.

Early indications are that the vomiting and diarrhea were caused by a norovirus, the Westchester County Department of Health said.

The department would not estimate how many people became ill, but people who were at events there put the number in the hundreds.

Guests at a black-tie dinner held April 20 by the Pelham Picture House and an event the following day have reported developing symptoms soon after.

"I was as sick as a dog for five days," Beryl Savage of White Plains said Monday. "I was so weak, I couldn't even stand up."

She and her two daughters attended the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Westchester Alumnae scholarship brunch. Within a day, all three came down with severe stomach problems.

Savage said that all 10 people at her table during the brunch were also sickened.

Organizers have said that 200 guests at the brunch got sick. It was not clear how many people who attended the Pelham Picture House event the night before came down with the illness.

Peter DeLucia, assistant commissioner of the agency's Bureau of Public Health Protection, said the county won't know for sure until Wednesday, but early indications are that the illness was caused by a norovirus. He urged people who are sick to stay home until they are better to prevent the spread.

Norovirus is the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis and the most common cause of food-borne disease outbreaks nationwide, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It is very contagious and can be transmitted by contaminated food or liquids, touching surfaces or objects with norovirus on them then putting your fingers in your mouth or by having contact with someone who is already infected.

Foods commonly involved in outbreaks include leafy greens, fresh fruits and shellfish, according to the CDC.

DeLucia cautioned that it is not yet clear how the norovirus was spread at the Hilton or even if food was involved.

The Hilton had its regular inspection Dec. 12, which showed one dangerous violation involving a refrigerator in an employee cafeteria. That violation was corrected immediately, records show.

A follow-up inspection Jan. 16 showed that seven less serious violations noted in the earlier visit also had been corrected.

Hilton officials said they were cooperating with the department.

The kitchen has not been closed, but special precautions are being taken there, including eliminating self-service buffets and public touch screens and increasing the use of sanitizers.

Janis Morris of Peekskill attended the brunch with her husband, John. She got sick the next day and her husband fell ill soon after. Then she learned that her sister and several friends were also sick.

She recalls eating an array of foods and salads at the brunch, but she has no idea how she contacted the illness.

Savage said she was contacted Monday by the Department of Health and answered an eight-page questionnaire about what she ate and what she did at the brunch.

"I hope they figure out what caused this," she said. "No one should have to go through what I just went through."

Additional Facts

Norovirus

Symptoms of norovirus infection include diarrhea, throwing up, nausea, and stomach cramping, low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and fatigue.

Most people get better in 1 to 2 days. Noroviruses can be serious in young children, the elderly, and people with other health conditions and can lead to severe dehydration, hospitalization and even death.

How to stop the spread of noroviruses:

- Practice proper hand hygiene by washing your hands carefully, especially after using the toilet.
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables, and cook oysters and other shellfish before eating them.
- Do not prepare food while infected.
- Clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces.
- Wash laundry thoroughly.

Source: CDC
