

Suspected Viral Gastroenteritis Probably Associated with a Catered Boat Cruise

October

Washington County

On October 15, 2013, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) foodborne illness hotline received a complaint of gastrointestinal illness among four individuals from two separate households who had dined together on October 13 on a catered boat cruise in Stillwater, Minnesota. Washington County Department of Public Health and Environment (WCPHE) was notified, and an outbreak investigation was initiated.

A patron reservation list and credit card receipts from October 13 were not available. Staff from WCPHE re-interviewed the original four complainants to obtain additional information on their food and beverage consumption. Personal and family illness histories along with other recent common activities were assessed as the two households were related and from same community. A case was defined as a person who developed vomiting and/or diarrhea (≥ 3 loose stools in a 24-hour period) following a meal on the boat cruise. Stool specimens were obtained from two consenting patrons from separate households and submitted to the MDH Public Health Laboratory for bacterial and viral testing.

WCPHE conducted an inspection of the entire seasonal operation (commissary, transport systems, riverboat galley, bar, buffet service line, and bathrooms) focusing on employee hygiene, employee work schedules, illness logs, food handling and transport practices, and equipment sanitation. An employee list with contact information, work schedules, and duties was obtained from the restaurant. WCPHE staff interviewed employees using a standard questionnaire about recent illness history (including household members) and job duties.

Illness histories and exposure information were obtained from the four complainants who attended a luncheon boat cruise. Two (50%) of the four complainants reported illness and met the case definition. Both cases reported diarrhea, one (50%) reported vomiting, and none reported fever. The median incubation period was 30 hours (range, 27 to 34 hours). The median duration of illness was 26 hours (range, 24 to 28 hours). Both cases were female. Both cases' stool samples tested negative for bacterial and viral enteric pathogens.

A statistical analysis of luncheon buffet items was not performed given the limited data.

Illness history and food worker duties were obtained from all 20 facility employees (commissary staff, riverboat's galley, bar and wait staff). No employee or family member illness was identified.

The October 16 environmental health field investigation revealed minimal deficiencies with commissary, transport, galley, or bar operations. Employee illness monitoring and tracking logs were not current. Food and beverage preparation, storage, transport, and service activities were in compliance with food code requirements. No bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat foods by commissary, galley, or bar staff was observed. All hand sinks located in the commissary, riverboat's galley, bar and restrooms were operational, and access was unrestricted. All hand sinks were stocked with soap, paper towels, and nailbrushes.

During employee interviews, investigators emphasized that employees cannot work while experiencing any symptoms of gastroenteritis. Investigators re-emphasized the need for proper handwashing and elimination of any bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat foods. Employees, regardless of job duties, were not allowed to return to work unless they had first been interviewed by WCPHE investigators.

Management was directed to screen each employee upon arrival for their work shift, checking for any symptoms of gastroenteritis and discussing employee health and illness exclusion policies. The employee screening practice was to remain in place for a minimum of 7 days. Management was directed to exclude any sick employee and

report illness immediately to WCPHE. Management was instructed to exclude any ill employees from work for 72 hours following resolution of their symptoms.

This was a probable foodborne outbreak associated with a catered boat cruise. The etiology was not confirmed; however, the distribution of symptoms and incubations were characteristic of viral gastroenteritis. The facility closed operations for the season on October 20, 2013 and will resume operation in summer 2014. The outbreak vehicle and source of contamination were identified.