

Ventura Chipotle Causes Illness

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On August 21, 2015, the Ventura County Environmental Health Division (EHD) received information that a number of people had become ill after eating at a Chipotle restaurant located in the Simi Valley Towne Center. The Division notified the Ventura County Public Health Division and began a joint investigation to determine if this food establishment was the source of the food borne illness outbreak; and to implement immediate steps to prevent further illnesses. The EHD also worked closely with the Chipotle corporate office to obtain information about employee work schedules and reports of employee illnesses.

The investigation revealed that during the week of August 18, 2015, about 80 restaurant customers and 18 restaurant employees reported symptoms characteristic of a gastrointestinal illness. The restaurant, in conformance with its own corporate policy, voluntarily closed the facility, threw out all remaining food products, cleaned and disinfected the facility including all food contact surfaces, and excluded all employees with symptoms from working in the restaurant. EHD staff conducted an inspection the following day to confirm that the food had been removed, the restaurant was adequately disinfected, and the 18 employees had been excluded from work.

As part of the investigation the EHD and Public Health staff interviewed affected customers and restaurant staff to determine when the illness began and what had been eaten. The EHD also ordered that all affected restaurant employees submit specimens for laboratory analysis in an attempt to determine the cause of the illnesses. As of today, 7 out of 18 samples tested positive for the Norovirus. The employees with positive test results will continue to be excluded from the restaurant until subsequent laboratory analysis results are negative for the virus and the Public Health Division has cleared them to return to work. There have been no further reports of illness since the initial reports two weeks ago.

"Norovirus is a very contagious virus. You can get norovirus from an infected person, contaminated food or water, or by touching contaminated surfaces. The virus causes your stomach or intestines or both to get inflamed (acute gastroenteritis). This leads to stomach pain, nausea, diarrhea and vomiting.", said Dr. Robert Levin, Ventura County Public Health Officer, "Norovirus is the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis in the United States and has been associated with several large outbreaks on cruise ships. The best way to help prevent norovirus is to practice proper hand washing and general cleanliness."

"The Environmental Health Division food protection program conducts regular inspections of the over 5,500 restaurants in Ventura County to protect the public by making sure that restaurants are complying with state laws and following safe practices when it comes to food handling, storage and preparation," said Bill Stratton, director of

the Environmental Health Division. "Most restaurant owners do a good job of keeping their businesses clean," said Stratton. "A foodborne illness outbreak can be devastating to a restaurant so they work hard to prevent them."

The Environmental Health Division developed a smartphone app that allows diners to both review the most recent inspection report for a restaurant they are visiting, and also to report any unsanitary conditions or practices they might observe while there. The app is called "VC SafeDiner" and it is available for both iPhones and Android devices.

"Our goal is to prevent foodborne illnesses from happening," said Stratton. "That may not always be possible, but we can certainly enforce the regulations that make illnesses less likely to occur and we do that vigorously."

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