

How to Avoid the Real and Present Danger of Norovirus on Cruise Ships



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Avoid the real and present danger of Norovirus on cruise ships by washing your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water. Outbreaks of Norovirus also occur on land in confined areas such as schools and nursing homes. It happens wherever people gather. Center for Disease Control (CDC) monitors and reports illnesses from Norovirus on cruise ships in a timely manner. As you have probably heard, these findings are quickly reported by the media. The number of Norovirus cases on land correlates to the number on cruise ships. It is perhaps more newsworthy when cruise ships have Norovirus outbreaks than for the on-land population segment outbreaks. While washing your hands may seem like a simple task, doing so greatly reduces your exposure to Norovirus whether on land or sea. Information included gives ways to protect and prepare you and your family while on board cruise ships.

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus on cruise ships is a highly contagious virus that causes stomach flu, also known as gastroenteritis. Escherichia coli (E coli) and salmonella, types of bacterial gastroenteritis, can be found in contaminated food, water, drinks and surfaces in public areas. Direct contact from a symptomatic individual to another individual can also spread Norovirus on cruise ships.

A contaminated food handler may also be a source for Norovirus. Symptomatic individuals spread Norovirus on cruise ships by touching elevator buttons, stair hand rails and door knobs. Workers wearing artificial nails can be a problem with hand sanitation. The glue used in adherence of artificial nails can hide microbes spreading infection. Also, a worker wearing artificial nails may not be inclined to scrub these surfaces thoroughly enough during hand sanitation.

What are Norovirus Symptoms?

Norovirus symptoms include watery diarrhea, fever, vomiting, abdominal cramping and headaches. Some may experience joint pain and a low-grade fever. Symptoms can last as long as three days. Norovirus on cruise ships is resistant to normal chlorine concentrations in swimming pools and drinking water. A routine health best practice for protecting your family and others is to not allow children in diapers or who are not toilet trained to use whirlpool spas or swimming pools on cruise ships. The same would also apply on land. Children wearing diapers may unknowingly leak fecal matter into the water, exposing others to illness.

Cruise ships, with engineered pools, providing extra protection and disinfection of fecal release from diapers or the not-yet-toilet trained have been reviewed by CDC's Vessel Sanitation Program (V-S-P). CDC's list includes Royal Caribbean's Freedom of the Seas, Oasis of the Seas, Liberty of the Seas and Independence of the Seas cruise ships. Also, Disney's Magic and Wonder are indicated by V-S-P as having this extra disinfection system.

Why Norovirus on Cruise Ships?

People and crew board cruise ships from all over the world. Some board the cruise ship with gastroenteritis or respiratory illnesses. CDC inspects cruise ships over 13 passengers and gives a sanitation score. Any score of less than 85 means conditions is unsatisfactory. Before boarding a cruise ship, check the Outbreak Updates for International Cruise Ships.

How to Prevent the Spread of Norovirus on Cruise Ships

Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends using soap and warm water to wash hands for a minimum of 20 seconds before drinking and eating, and after using the toilet. You should wash hands before brushing your teeth or if you have helped an ill person with Norovirus. Wash your hands after changing diapers, touching public surfaces, blowing your nose, touching your face and returning to your stateroom. When you wash your hands, apply a generous amount of soap. Thoroughly rub soap on all surfaces of the hands. Rinse your hands and dry with a paper towel. Use the paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the door.

Commercial hand sanitizers may be placed around the ship and especially around the restaurants to prevent Norovirus on cruise ships. If the sanitizer consists of 60 to 70 percent ethanol concentration, it needs a full minute's contact time covering the entire hand in order to inactivate Norovirus.

A system, in place by CDCs V-S-P, requires cruise ships to keep a log and report the number of incidents of gastroenteritis or Norovirus on cruise ships. If more than three percent of the passengers are ill, then CDC conducts a very specific, comprehensive on-board investigation with a summary report of findings and recommendations.

Perhaps a method for Norovirus detection in passengers before boarding is a good idea. Also, the cruise industry can monitor port cities for a greater than normal occurrence of gastroenteritis or Norovirus and be more cautious.

Things you can do while on board is watch what you eat and avoid foods that may make you sick. Stay hydrated while performing vigorous activities. If you are feeling ill before boarding the cruise ship, check with your physician. With these tips for how to avoid the real and present danger of Norovirus on cruise ships, you can enjoy your cruise knowing you have done all you can do.

References

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