

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Health Issues Norovirus Outbreak Alert

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ST. CROIX -- The Virgin Islands Department of Health said in a press release issued Wednesday that it was notified of ongoing reports of gastrointestinal illness, including vomiting and diarrhea on St. Croix. D.O.H. said six specimens were collected from individuals who exhibited symptom from Dec. 11. Those specimens were sent to Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) for norovirus testing on December 20, and five came back positive.

D.O.H. says the virus is common at this time of the year, adding that this year's festivities continue, it is important to emphasize that food workers (restaurants/resorts/festival booths), experiencing the above mentioned symptoms, should refrain from working (preparing and handling food/drinks/ice) for at least 72 hours (three days) after their

symptoms go away, and that anyone else experiencing symptoms consistent with norovirus should also refrain from handling food for others until 72 hours after their symptoms go away.

Symptoms of a norovirus infection can include vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, headache, body aches, and sometimes a mild fever. People typically become ill 24 to 48 hours after exposure to the virus, and symptoms usually last one to two days.

Norovirus is present in the stool (feces) and vomit of infected people. It is spread primarily through contact with infected individuals, or through contamination of food prepared by a person who is currently ill or has been recently ill and didn't wash their hands appropriately.

Although people commonly refer to norovirus illness as "stomach flu," the illness is not the same as influenza. Influenza is primarily a respiratory illness, characterized by symptoms like high fever, body aches, sneezing, a runny nose or a sore throat. Moreover, while influenza can be prevented with a vaccine, there is no vaccine for norovirus, leaving good handwashing as the primary defense. Precautions that can help prevent the spread of noroviruses include:

- Washing your hands after going to the bathroom
- Washing your hands before handling food, beverages and ice
- Washing your hands before eating
- Excusing yourself from food preparation duties if you have diarrhea and/or vomiting
- Discarding foods that were handled or prepared by someone with diarrhea and/or vomiting
- Promptly cleaning and disinfecting any surfaces that become soiled with vomit or stool
- Staying home if you are ill

It is important to note that people can spread the virus for up to three days after their symptoms go away. For this reason, it is imperative that individuals who have experienced norovirus symptoms refrain from preparing and handling foods for other individuals until 72 hours after symptoms go away and continue to practice exemplary handwashing and personal hygiene. This is especially important among food handlers and restaurant workers.