



Noroviruses and Food Handlers

Noroviruses, previously known as “Norwalk-like viruses,” affect the stomach and the intestines causing gastroenteritis or “stomach flu.” This type of “stomach flu” is not to be confused with influenza, which is a respiratory illness.

People working with food who are sick with norovirus are a particular risk to others because they handle food and drink that many other people will consume. Since the virus itself is so small, a sick food handler can easily (without meaning to) contaminate the food he or she is handling. This could very easily lead to a potential foodborne outbreak. It is estimated that half of all food-related illness outbreaks may have been caused by norovirus.

The symptoms of infection with norovirus are:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal cramps
- Headache
- Fever/chills
- Muscle aches

Symptoms usually last only a few days, however the virus can continue to be present in the stool for 2-3 weeks after the person feels better. Noroviruses are very contagious, and it is believed that ingesting as few as 10 to 100 viral particles can cause an individual to become ill. People usually spread the virus during the time they are experiencing vomiting or diarrhea.

Here’s how you can prevent the spread of norovirus in your facility:

- Be very aware of the health of all food service workers. Any food service worker who is experiencing vomiting, diarrhea or fever must be excluded from work until these symptoms have passed for 24 hours.
- Be sure to wash all fresh fruits and vegetables thoroughly, especially those that will not be cooked prior to service.
- Stress and reinforce the importance of handwashing on a routine basis. The single most effective way to prevent the spread of norovirus is frequent and proper handwashing. Make sure that all handwashing sinks are accessible and are provided with hot and cold running water, soap and paper towels.
- Limit/eliminate bare hand contact with ready-to-eat foods. Use utensils, disposable waxed paper, or single use gloves.