Beat: Health

Nearly 300 become ill with virus on Royal Caribbean vessel

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USPA News - U.S. health officials will board a Royal Caribbean International cruise ship on Sunday to investigate fast-spreading norovirus that has infected nearly 300 passengers and crew members, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said. The Explorer of the Seas cruise ship set sail January 21 on a 10-day voyage from Cape Liberty, New Jersey to the Caribbean island of St. Maarten.

The ship stopped part way through the expedition after the highly contagious norovirus sickened some 281 of the 3,050 passengers and 22 of the 1,165 crew members. The virus yields predominant symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea. In response to the outbreak, Royal Caribbean Cruise Line and the crew aboard the ship have increased cleaning and disinfection procedures according to their outbreak prevention and response plan. Over-the-counter medication has also been administered to those affected and stool specimens were collected for submission to a CDC lab for testing. "We sincerely apologize for this disruption to our guests` cruise vacation," Royal Caribbean officials said on Sunday. To prevent additional infections, the ship bypassed its port call to Labadee, Haiti, that was scheduled for Friday, in order to sail directly to San Juan, Puerto Rico, where the ship underwent extensive and thorough sanitizing, according to the vessel`s owner. The company issued a statement Sunday that said: "At Royal Caribbean International we have high health standards for all our guests and crew. Throughout the sailing, we have taken a number of steps to prevent the transmission of the illness, including implementing enhanced cleaning procedures and protocols, and using special cleaning products and disinfectants that are proven to kill norovirus to clean throughout the ship. These activities will continue as the sailing proceeds." A CDC Vessel Sanitation Program officer and an epidemiologist planned to board the ship Sunday in St. Thomas of the U.S. Virgin Islands to conduct an epidemiological investigation, environmental health assessment, and evaluate the cause of the outbreak and response activities. The cruise line is consulting with the CDC on the possibility to delay Friday`s return to New Jersey. Norovirus is a fast-moving gut bug typically spread by infected people or contaminated food or water. Norovirus is the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis in the U.S., resulting in about 21 million illnesses, between 56,000 and 71,000 hospitalizations and as many as 800 deaths each year, the CDC says. The virus lingers on surfaces and spreads very easily. Thorough hand-washing with hot water and soap and meticulous environmental cleaning can help stop the spread. It?s not yet clear whether the outbreak on Explorer of the Seas has been linked to a nasty new type of norovirus known as the GII 4 Sydney strain. That was the bug blamed for an outbreak last year on the Queen Mary 2. During a voyage from December 22, 2012, to January 3, 2013, 204 passengers and 16 crew members developed norovirus.

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