

Cruise ships battle onboard bugs

Disinfectant 'hit squads' and handwashing reminders aim to keep viruses away

By Kelly Sinoski, Vancouver Sun

Cruise ships are using hit squads, litres of disinfectant and a handwashing mantra to prevent the spread of the norovirus among passengers.

The stringent strategy, supported by a once-a-year 41-point inspection and audit by Health Canada, began in 2005 after a series of norovirus outbreaks on cruise ships five or six years ago.

Norovirus, also known as the Norwalk-like virus, causes intense episodes of vomiting and diarrhea which usually clears up within 48 hours. It is spread from hand-to-mouth contact, usually by touching doorknobs, handrails or toilets.

Last month two ships were detained in Vancouver because of an outbreak of the norovirus. In January, 263 passengers and 27 crew fell ill with the virus after the ship left England Jan. 2.

But health and cruise ship officials say this isn't nearly as bad as five years ago when four or five vessels would be detained each month because of an outbreak.

"Cruise ships are a confined space with 2,000 to 3,000 people mingling with each other," said James Gibson, director of public health for Princess Cruises, during a tour of the Coral Princess Monday.

"Once the virus gets on board, it spreads fast, like in schools, hospitals or other facilities. What the cruise ship has to do is ensure it doesn't spread."

To attack the problem, Health Canada and cruise ship officials push extreme cleanliness -- even in the cruise ship terminal.

So-called "hit squads" are trained to clean up vomit in terminals and deal with potentially ill passengers before they get on board.

On the Coral Princess, which was given a perfect health rating in its latest health inspection audit, passengers are reminded repeatedly to wash their hands.

They can't even get close to the buffet without using a hand sanitizer, while children and youth can't touch a toy or foosball table until their hands are clean.

And, when they're finished, whether it's at the dinner table, spa, lounge or gym, all surfaces are wiped down with the hydrogen peroxide-based Virox disinfectant, or mild bleach in the kitchen.

If there's an outbreak -- or a "red alert" -- every handrail and elevator button is scrubbed as well. About 400 litres of Virox disinfectant is used on every voyage, Gibson said.

Chlorine levels in the ship's seven pools are also tested every four hours, foot baths are disinfected following every customer, and food at the buffet is thrown out after three hours.

Harsh Thakore, regional manager for Health Canada, said it is in the ships' best interest to ensure passengers and crew are protected.

Health Canada inspects 70 vessels every season to ensure proper protocols are being followed. About 36 of those are in Vancouver, Victoria and growing cruise ship ports of Prince Rupert and Campbell River.

The inspections take about six hours each for specific areas including food and beverage, potable water and the bars.

Inspectors look at gastrointestinal surveillance, water supply and storage, employee hygiene practices, general cleanliness, food protection preparation and service and day cares and child activity centres.

"The shipping companies have gotten so good because they don't actually want to be stopped," Thakore said.

He said there is always a background of illness on a cruise ship that might be gastrointestinal. People might be seasick, for instance, or drink too much.

If passengers get the norovirus, they are usually isolated in their cabins until they're better.

"The cruise ships are very safe," Thakore said. "There's no reason why passengers should not consider going on a trip."