



CMAA Crisis Communication White Paper

When Disaster Strikes – Prevention, Communication, and Recovery: Norovirus Outbreaks in Clubs (Quick Read)

CMAA IS DEVELOPING A SERIES OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION WHITE PAPERS that will provide useful suggestions contributed by club managers who have experienced selected crisis, and the first of these white papers addresses the management of Norovirus outbreaks.

What Is Norovirus? Norovirus is a contagious virus causing vomiting and diarrhea in infected persons of all ages. Other symptoms can include nausea, stomach pain, fever, headaches, and body aches. Dehydration can result, especially in young children, older adults, and those with other illnesses.

Norovirus is easily spread as persons have direct contact with those who are infected, consume contaminated food or water, and/or touch contaminated surfaces and then put their unclean fingers in their mouths. Norovirus symptoms typically appear 12-48 hours after exposure and may last for two days. Infected persons can spread norovirus from when they start feeling ill to at least three days after no symptoms are exhibited.

Leafy greens including lettuce and fresh fruits are commonly involved in norovirus outbreaks. However, any food served raw that is incorrectly handled may become contaminated.

Preventing Norovirus Infections. Infected food service employees are involved in 70 percent of norovirus outbreaks for which the source(s) of contamination have been reported. A wide array of basic food handling precautions must be implemented, and using proper handwashing and hand drying tactics and not touching ready-to-eat foods with uncovered hands are among the most important. The provision of effective training programs to teach food service employees proper food handling techniques is critical as is a formal and club-specific policy concerning employees working when they are ill. Kitchen surfaces and frequently-touched objects must be regularly cleaned and sanitized with chemicals approved for this purpose by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Managing Norovirus Outbreaks. Numerous telephone calls and other contacts from members and guests who have recently dined at the club typically signal that a norovirus outbreak may have occurred. Contacts with Board officials, a representative of a food safety assessment firm, the applicable health department and the club's attorney are typically made, and the club's food service venues are closed.

Senior food and beverage managers may ask employees if any have suffered from or lived with someone who had exhibited norovirus symptoms within the last 72 hours. Managers also typically meet with employees currently at the club to inform them about the problem and request that they leave the facility while clean-up plans are made (messages are sent to non-present staff).

The food safety assessment company representative will visit the club (hopefully the next day!) to conduct detailed “how to clean” training with the senior management team. Specific topics include cleaning methods and appropriate chemicals, proper cleaning attire, cleaning location sequence, and cleaning “targets”: “Any place or thing where persons can put their hands.” At the conclusion of the training, these managers then train other staff members who have been assigned cleaning tasks. Facility recovery efforts must be documented and the start and finish times and names of team members assigned to the clean-up of each space should be recorded.

Clean-up activities may take several days. All efforts should focus on bringing the club back to operation as soon as possible without sacrificing quality goals and to regain the members’ trust and the club’s reputation as seen by all stakeholders. Daily contacts with the health department are useful to seek advice about cleaning and revised food handling procedures and to plan an inspection schedule to enable the club’s food and beverage venues to re-open.

Crisis Management and Communication. General Managers must provide on-going, current, and accurate information updates for the club’s Board and members while the club is closed; daily up-dates are usually best. Most crisis communication experts suggest that one person should be chosen as spokesperson for communication with stakeholders. He/she should represent the entire club, be knowledgeable about the situation, and genuinely care about message content and quality.

The General Manager should meet with the club’s Board within 24-48 hours of club closure (typically the sooner the better!). Board members will be receiving input and questions from members, and they need current and accurate information. The General Manager will likely have several daily conversations with the Board President to discuss concerns including capital costs related to the outbreak and procedural changes important to members.

When speaking to the news media, there are three important messages to express: (a) the club is concerned about anyone and everyone who is affected, (b) it is working with the local health department and a food safety assessment organization to prepare for re-opening and (c) the club is committed to upholding the highest food standards for which it is known. It is important to address all questions in ways that communicate truth and help the club re-establish trust and credibility in the short-and long-term. All messages, regardless if spoken or written, must express genuine empathy.

Club Re-Opening Procedures. Results of successful food safety inspections should be posted on the member section of the club’s website, and club members should be informed about re-opening plans. Existing product inventories and laundry requirements must be assessed, and items in sufficient quantities to provide meals for the first few days after re-opening must be ordered and received from vendors. Food service employees meeting the 72-hour “no norovirus symptoms” requirements must be scheduled, and initial work times should include a basic food safety training program with an emphasis on proper handwashing procedures. At the completion of that program, food pre-preparation activities and mise en place for opening food production requirements can be undertaken.

The General Manager, board members, and their spouses will hopefully attend the re-opening of à la carte dining services, and the General Manager should “manage by walking around” while speaking to all possible members and answering questions about the closure and re-opening process.