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**Suspected Norovirus Gastroenteritis Associated with Jimmy John's
Brooklyn Park, Minnesota
February, 2006**

Background

On February 21, 2006, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) foodborne illness hotline received a complaint of gastrointestinal illness among two family members from a single household who ate dinner together at Jimmy John's in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota on February 17. No other complaints were reported at that time, but one of the complainants was an employee at Jimmy John's. City of Brooklyn Park environmentalists went to the Jimmy John's, but found no employee illness. On March 2, the MDH foodborne illness hotline received a second complaint of gastrointestinal illness among three co-workers who ate at Jimmy John's on February 15. The City of Brooklyn Park was notified of this complaint and a full investigation was initiated.

Methods

MDH staff interviewed complainants about food consumption and illness history. A case was defined as any person who ate at Jimmy John's and subsequently developed vomiting and/or diarrhea (≥ 3 loose stools in a 24-hour period).

City of Brooklyn Park environmentalists conducted an environmental health assessment at Jimmy John's after each complaint. The manager of the establishment was asked about employee illness since late January, staff at the restaurant were interviewed, and food preparation practices were observed and discussed.

Results

Four patrons representing two complaints were reached for interview, and all four met the case definition. All four cases reported diarrhea, vomiting, and cramps, and three (75%) reported fever. No cases reported bloody stools. The median incubation period was 35 hours (range, 31 to 40 hours). The median duration of illness was 44 hours (range, 36 to 84 hours).

Cases ate a variety of sandwiches with various vegetable toppings. The restaurant was not asked for patron names since it had been over 2 weeks since illness onsets; therefore a meaningful statistical analysis could not be conducted.

Employee interviews revealed that four employees were ill in the previous month. Of these, three had vomiting (two also had diarrhea) and one had nausea and fever. Onsets for the three ill foodworkers were February 5, 17, and 25. Several staff were handling ready-to-eat foods without gloves at the restaurant, though handwashing stations were accessible and fully stocked. The restaurant did not have an employee illness log, and did not have a certified food manager. Previous attempts to get an employee certified as a food manager had failed. All staff were educated on the importance of handwashing. Management and staff were also educated on the importance of excluding ill foodworkers and the possibility of transmission of illness from foodworkers to patrons.

Conclusion

This was a foodborne outbreak of gastroenteritis associated with Jimmy John's in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. The symptoms and incubation periods were characteristic of norovirus. A specific food vehicle was not determined. The source of the outbreak was most likely an ill or recently ill foodworker who contaminated ready-to-eat foods through bare-hand contact.