

City of Houston averted norovirus outbreak caused by tainted oysters

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CATEGORY: **Epidemiology & Laboratory Capacity (ELC)**

The Houston Health Department (HHD), TX, responded to a norovirus outbreak associated with tainted oysters. Using relationships with partners throughout the area, they were able to disseminate disease-prevention messaging and expanded foodborne-disease education activities.

The “What”

On 12/09/2022, the HHD’s Bureau of Epidemiology (BOE), which receives funding through the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC) for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases cooperative agreement, was notified of a norovirus outbreak. BOE’s disease investigation found that norovirus was associated with tainted oysters from the Galveston Bay TX-1 area. BOE worked collaboratively with the Bureau of Consumer Health (BCH) to immediately notify Houston-area restaurants to stop serving oysters from the Galveston Bay area. This instantaneous notification eventually led to the containment of the outbreak and prevented further spread of norovirus.


The “So What”

Epidemiologists worked collaboratively with BCH, the public information office, and the City of Houston Laboratory to contain the foodborne outbreak. Timely and appropriate public health measures for activities relating to the Norovirus outbreak were key in averting an outbreak situation in Houston and the neighboring counties.

The “Now What”

Situations like this norovirus outbreak have enhanced HHD-BOE’s relationships with regional public health partners. It also highlighted the need for continued education for staff and partners. ELC funding has ensured BOE has access to learning opportunities. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sponsored a peer-to-peer learning opportunity where epidemiologists from the Colorado Food Safety Center of Excellence and the HHD-BOE led a Foodborne Illness Tabletop Exercise for the entire Texas Public Health Region (DSHS) 6/5 South. Nine other local health departments from the DSHS 6/5S participated with their foodborne outbreak response personnel. Total registrants for the Tabletop Exercise were 76. This has laid a foundation for more epidemiology and outbreak response training in the future.

Key contributors to this project include Stephen Long, MD, MPH and Kirstin Short, MPH at the Houston Health Department.

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