

Vessel Sanitation Program

What Is the Public Health Issue?

Each year, newer and larger vessels are added to the fleet of the commercial cruise ship industry; the largest vessels now can carry as many as 5,000 passengers and crew members. In 2004, more than 9.4 million (up from 8 million in 2003)¹ passengers embarked cruise vessels from North American ports. Both passengers and crew members are potentially at risk for illnesses associated with food and water, environmental contamination, and person-to-person disease transmission.

What Has CDC Accomplished?

In 1975, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established the Vessel Sanitation Program (VSP), which collaborates with the cruise ship industry to proactively protect the health of travelers. VSP is the sole CDC program funded entirely by user service fees; each vessel owner pays a fee, based on tonnage, for sanitation inspections conducted by Environmental Health Officers of the United States Public Health Service. This federal government program assists the industry in developing and implementing comprehensive sanitation programs to minimize risks for gastrointestinal diseases. Every vessel with a foreign and U.S. itinerary that carries 13 or more passengers is subject to two unannounced environmental inspections each year. Additionally, since 1989, CDC staff have offered sanitation seminars to cruise ship management personnel five to six times each year. In 2003, more than 30 cruise lines participated in this innovative inspection program. The likelihood of ships passing an inspection increased by 21% from 1990 to 2000.²

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In 2004, VSP accomplished the following:

- Instituted an automated web-based Gastrointestinal Illness Surveillance System to receive and process vessel reports
- Analyzed specimens from 24 cruise ship outbreaks to test for causative agents
- Conducted 287 routine unannounced inspections of cruise vessels in U.S. ports
- Conducted 1 detailed new construction plan/drawing review, 12 onsite construction inspections, and 9 final construction inspections
- Provided public health guidance during 38 gastrointestinal outbreaks
- Provided vessel sanitation guidance during the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in preparation for cruise ship accommodations for 11,000 passengers on 11 cruise ships
- Served on the World Health Organization (WHO) committee charged with revising *Guide to Ship Sanitation*
- Participated in examining the environmental health impacts and providing recommendations to day care facilities that were damaged by the 2004 summer hurricanes in Florida and Alabama



What Are the Next Steps?

CDC continues its ongoing collaboration with the cruise ship industry by implementing advanced public health measures to prevent, identify, and control diseases associated with food, water, environmental contamination, and person-to-person transmission. CDC will continue to assist U.S. and international public health agencies, the public, and the cruise ship industry to maintain the highest public health standards for passengers and crew members aboard cruise vessels by conducting training sessions, reviewing construction plans, and inspecting vessels. CDC will continue its efforts to use this model cooperative voluntary public health service program as a basis for improved land-based public health programs.

References

1. Cruise Lines International Association: <http://www.cruising.org>.
2. Cramer EH, Gu DX, Durbin RE; Vessel Sanitation Program Environmental Health Inspection Team. Diarrheal disease on cruise ships, 1990–2000: the impact of environmental health programs. *Am J Prev Med.* 2003 Apr;24(3):227–33.

For more information about this program, visit
<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp>

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