

VESSEL SANITATION PROGRAM

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

New and larger cruise vessels are being built each year, with the largest vessels carrying as many as 5,000 passengers and crew members. In 2002, about 7.4 million (up from 6.8 million in 2001) passengers took cruises to North-American ports. Both passengers and crew members are at risk for illness from contaminated food and water and other environmental sources including person-to-person disease transmission.

WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

CDC established the model Vessel Sanitation Program (VSP) in 1975, which combines industry cooperation with CDC's ability to take aggressive actions to protect the health of travelers. Currently, VSP is the only CDC program funded completely by user-service fees; each vessel owner pays a fee, based on tonnage, for all inspections. The program assists the industry in developing and implementing comprehensive sanitation programs to minimize risks for gastrointestinal diseases. Every vessel that has a foreign itinerary and carries 13 or more passengers is subject to two unannounced inspections each year. Additionally, since 1989, CDC staff have offered sanitation seminars to shipboard management five times a year. In 2002, more than 140 cruise ships participated in this innovative program. VSP has demonstrated amazing success working with the cruise ship industry, resulting in an 87% decrease in disease outbreaks among passengers during the last 25 years.

In 2002, VSP's highlighted accomplishments include the following:

- Instituted an automated e-mail-based Gastrointestinal Illness Surveillance System to receive and process more than 300 cruise vessel reports per month.
- Conducted 17 gastrointestinal illness investigations.
- Conducted 235 routine unannounced inspections of cruise vessels in U.S. ports.
- Conducted 12 detailed new construction plan/drawing reviews and more than 37 final construction inspections.
- Provided several training sessions to Egyptian Inspectors and managers responsible for inspections of Nile cruise boats and hotels, which serve more than 500,000 passengers each year.
- Served on the World Health Organization committee charged with revising the *Guide to Ship Sanitation*.
- Streamlined inspection report delivery process by providing an instant draft report at the close of inspections.
- Added cruise vessels' Corrective Action Statements to the detailed online database of VSP inspection reports.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

CDC will continue to focus VSP operations on identifying critical areas to prevent potential disease from food, water, and other environmental sources. CDC will continue to assist U.S. and international public health agencies, the public, and the cruise ship industry in maintaining the highest public health standards for passengers and crew members aboard cruise vessels by conducting training sessions, construction plan reviews, and vessel inspections. 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. Finally CDC will continue working with the cruise lines to institute the most advanced measures needed to ensure the highest level of safety possible.