COMMUNICATING THROUGH CRISIS:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM A NOROVIRUS OUTBREAK

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WHAT IS A CRISIS?

• A turning point for better or worse
• An emotionally significant event
• An unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending
• A situation that has reached a critical phase
PRESENTATION OVERVIEW

• My background
• Georgia Tech
• A mystery illness hits campus
• Lessons Learned
• Building your own health crisis plan
MY BACKGROUND

UCONN MCB

UMASS AMHERST School of Public Health and Health Sciences

CREATING THE NEXT®
MY BACKGROUND
MY BACKGROUND

Georgia Tech Health & Well-Being

- Campus Recreation
- Health Initiatives
- Stamps Health Services
28,427 students

19,941 students on Atlanta campus

~10,000 living in on-campus housing

~8,400 employees

~7,100 staff

~1,300 faculty
SEPTEMBER 2017

- Incident on campus
  - Campus unrest
- Closures due to Hurricane Irma
MYSTERIOUS GI ILLNESS APPEARS ON CAMPUS

/r/gatech chat here

Dining halls have food poisoning outbreak- be warned. self/gatech

Submitted 6 months ago by thefish42

Can we get a response to this from GT dining?

56 comments share save hide report

- eggdrop32 69 points 6 months ago

I was affected by the food poisoning - not a stomach bug.

For information about others, please see the following:

https://iwaspoisoned.com/?s=Atlanta%2C+GA
https://www.reddit.com/r/gatech/comments/767qcp/anybody_else_get_sick_after_eating_at_west/

My story:

On October 14, 2017 at about 2:30 pm, I consumed lunch at the North Avenue dining hall at Georgia Tech. There, I ate a sandwich and chicken, among other food items served by the dining hall. A few hours after the meal, I began to experience pain and discomfort in my stomach. Soon, the symptoms worsened into diarrhea and vomiting, which are consistent with food poisoning. I had to go to Urgent Care to see a doctor. After examination, the doctor gave me a shot and prescribed to me antibiotics and other medications. Later that night, I continued to experience the symptoms and developed a severe fever. The fever and nausea continued throughout the weekend. As of today, I am still on medication and have not fully recovered.
MYSTERIOUS GI ILLNESS APPEARS ON CAMPUS

• Day 1, October 13th
  • Cases begin to present at Stamps Health Services
  • Symptoms lasting 12 – 36 hours
    • Diarrhea
    • Vomiting
    • Fever
    • Body aches
  • Comms team begins drafting central document
  • Enhanced cleaning begins in housing, dining, and health services
Day 4, October 16\textsuperscript{th}

- Fulton County Department of Health & Wellness (FCDH) contacted
- Stamps Health Services issues a health advisory
- Email to all students, social media, webpage created
- News media stories begin
Day 5, October 17th

- 50 cases at Stamps Health Services
- No pattern of illness (i.e. food eaten, dining hall, residence hall, etc.)
- FCDH begins survey
- Expanded enhanced cleaning procedures begin
Day 6, October 18th - FCDH inspects dining halls
Day 7, October 19th – Health Advisory updated
Day 8, October 20th
- 121 patients with symptoms of illness seen at Stamps Health Services
- 193 pf 226 people who participated in FCDH survey report symptoms of mystery illness
- Email to faculty asking for leniency

CASE COUNTS CONTINUE TO GROW

Any advise for those of us currently sick? self.gatech
I read the email and learned what to do medically, but it doesn't really fit with my current schedule. I don't have time to rest or not go to class. I have two exams and a couple of homework assignments due this week. Not exactly sure what my plan of action should be. Should I wait until tomorrow to figure out whether I need to email my professors and go to the health center?
I guess that's a given, but what would y'all do? Thanks
What would you do in my situation? I feel like shit, throwing up anything I eat that's heavy, I've been sipping on water. I have a headache, and I think I'm having fever chills but taking medicine is just going to get rejected
7 comments share save hide report
• Day 11, October 23rd - Samples test negative for bacteria

• Day 13, October 25th
  • 3 of 4 samples test positive for norovirus
  • 136 cases seen at Stamps Health Services
  • Health Advisory updated

• Day 15, October 27th – “What you need to know” article published

• November – Cases stop after Thanksgiving break
WHAT WE DID WELL

• Centralizing communications
• Transparency
• Plain language
• Media monitoring
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

• “Breaking” our own news
• Lack of standard operating procedure
• Utilizing campus partners’ communication channels
• Lack of bandwidth for additional prevention messages
WHAT’S NEXT

• Development of SOP for health crises
• Creating toolkits on common communicable illnesses
• Handwashing campaigns annually

NOROVIRUS
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Norovirus is highly contagious and easily spreads from one person to another. The virus can live on surfaces and clothes for days to weeks. Good personal hygiene, like regular hand washing, is key to protecting yourself and others.

FOR MORE INFORMATION GO TO HEALTH.GATECH.EDU

image source: CDC
BE FIRST. BE RIGHT. BE CREDIBLE.

• Be First
  • Time sensitive
  • First source of info often becomes the preferred source

• Be Right
  • Accuracy establishes credibility
  • Information should always include:
    • What you know
    • What you don’t know
    • What is being done to fill in the gaps

• Be Credible
  • Accuracy + Speed = credibility
  • Honesty & Truthfulness should not be compromised
KEY ELEMENTS TO HEALTH CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

• Before
  • Identify stakeholders & roles
  • Determine communication channels
  • Prepare toolkits (if possible) on common communicable diseases

• During
  • Maintain central key messages document
  • Update communications every 2-3 days

• After
  • Debrief
QUESTIONS?

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