

Sick at Sea: (But Not Sea Sick!)

by Sara Varney, PassPorter Guidebooks Author

A Disney Cruise Line (DCL) voyage is truly a dream vacation. You plan, you book, and you linger over every page of *PassPorter's Disney Cruise Line* guidebook, choosing shore excursions and spa treatments. Then embarkation day finally arrives! You check in and confidently answer "No!" to the question asked of everyone, "Have you experienced any vomiting or diarrhea in the past three days?" And, admit it, you wonder if anyone ever says "Yes!" to that question! You may even wonder why the question is necessary.

The Norwalk virus or norovirus is a gastrointestinal virus sometimes referred to as "stomach flu." Norovirus can be found everywhere, not just on cruise ships, but because of the close proximity of the passengers on board, the virus can spread like wildfire on board a ship. It is the reason for the uncomfortable question during check in as well as the reason that you are handed an anti-bacterial wipe every time you turn around on a Disney ship.

Not every stomach upset is caused by norovirus, as I had reason to learn on a recent cruise, but every stomach upset that requires a visit to the infirmary (as mine did, when it arrived partway through my cruise) requires a 48 hour isolation period. According to the paperwork I received from DCL, "Isolation is a mandatory Federal Law issued by CDC (Centers for Disease Control), and not a rule issued by Disney Cruise Line." Bottom line -- cruise lines simply cannot be too careful with that many people on board. And there is no point arguing - they are answering to a higher power on this issue!

So what happens when you get sick on a Disney cruise? Let me tell you, it's really not that bad! On my recent cruise, I was, ironically enough, among the people not bothered by the 16-foot waves. However, I do have severe food allergies and awoke one night to very familiar symptoms. (I'll spare you the details.) I had brought an over the counter "pink" medicine that normally does the trick but, like a fool or perhaps being a bit "Goofy," I left the stronger medicine at home. And I learned, when my roommate took pity on me the next morning and went in search of it, that Disney Cruise Line does not stock any type of anti-nausea or anti-diarrheal medication! Why? Because they need to know if anyone is experiencing these symptoms.

So it was off to the medical center for me. The medical center is located on Deck 1. There I was greeted by the friendly staff, asked to fill out some forms looking for many details including what and where I had

eaten for the past three days, and then shown to an examination room.

A few minutes later, I met Dr. Le Roux, a charming physician from South Africa. After some questions and some poking and prodding of my abdomen, he determined that while my food allergy may be the culprit, there was also a good chance of it being norovirus. He explained the isolation policy -- isolation of 48 hours from your last incident of symptoms. He also gave me the good news - he would be giving me medications for my symptoms. Best news I'd had all morning, as by this point I was so miserable feeling better was all I cared about. Isolation, shmisolation, just give me the pills!

I was given a packet of paperwork with instructions for the medications, a bill in case I wanted it for my records (although I was not charged for this visit or the medications), and the contact information for the guest services team who would be looking after me for the next 2 days.

Let me just say -- if you have to be ill and in isolation, the Disney Cruise Line is definitely not a bad place to be. I was well taken care of, probably better than I would have been at home! While in isolation you receive the following:

- * Any shore excursions that you had scheduled will be canceled and refunded to your account, as obviously you will not be able to participate.

- * Board games, DVDs, and DVD players, toys (for children ages 3-17), and even pediatric popsicles are available upon request. (I watched The Da Vinci Code and Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium during my stay.)

- * Non-alcoholic beverages will be brought to you at no charge. I was brought ginger ale, bottled water, and Powerade within an hour of being back in my room.

- * Meals will be provided in your room from your scheduled dining room each evening. (No, you cannot order from Palo!) I was contacted each evening by our head server to see what I wanted. Room service is available 24 hours a day as well. Be sure to ask if you need or want something special. They were able to accommodate my request for toast and broth at 7:00 at night!

- * Afternoon Tea will be provided upon request.

- * Complimentary laundry service will be provided for any items worn or soiled while you were sick. I sent the nightgown and clothes that I wore that morning, and had them back cleaned and hung within 90 minutes!

- * You also have a Guest Services team assigned to you during your isolation. (Otherwise known as the concierge team, who normally services the guests in the suites!) Patty and Richard called me every few

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hours to check on me and see if I needed anything. They were absolutely wonderful! They were attentive and very kind. My stateroom host was also wonderful and made sure to keep an eye out for me. (Yes, this is partially to ensure that I am in my room where I am supposed to be, but also just a sign of the superior customer service.)

* After 24 hours, you are allowed to disembark the ship if in port. You cannot participate in ANY group activities -- no shore excursions, no island tours, etc. I walked around the port area in Tortola for a little while, bought some t-shirts and went back to bed.

Here are the most important lessons I learned. First, pack any and ALL medications you may need, especially if, like me, you have food allergies or other stomach issues such as IBS or Crohn's. Second, consider carefully what stateroom you book. We were in an inside Category 11 stateroom. While this would have been fine under normal circumstances, 48 hours without natural light has convinced me to never book an inside stateroom again, just in case. Third, while I accepted the isolation willingly, the doctor explained that many guests become upset when learning of this possibility. Please keep in mind that this is not a DCL rule, it is federal law as dictated by the CDC. And while yes, you paid a lot of money to be on the ship, DCL is just doing the best they can to ensure that everyone on the ship remains happy and healthy.

By the way, this is also a good reason to consider a longer cruise. Had I been on a three night sailing, I would have missed most of the fun!

About The Author: Sara lives in New England with her family. In addition to her work with PassPorter, Sara is also a Travel Planner for [MEI & Mouse Fan Travel](#).

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