



Handling Suspected COVID-19 Cases on a Vessel



Although many companies have rigorous medical guidelines for handling injuries at sea, novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has added many complications to the normal procedures.

First, diagnosis can be difficult. The best way to confirm that a crewmember has COVID-19 is to complete a test that detects the presence of the virus. Unfortunately, these tests require extensive laboratory equipment and usually take over 24 hours to get results (once successfully shipped to the lab).

Second, there is often nowhere to quarantine a crewmember suspected of having COVID-19 on a small vessel.

Third, when medical evacuations are called for, they can be complicated by new coronavirus-related procedures.

To address these challenges, some companies are changing their operations to help make sure their crewmembers are safe at sea. One method is to increase testing prior to crewmembers boarding the vessel.

Developing a Screening Plan

Making sure that no crewmembers are infected with coronavirus when boarding the vessel is one of the most effective means of keeping crewmembers healthy. Once at sea, crewmembers are effectively quarantined from everyone but one another.

Testing for the presence of the virus is probably the most effective means of determining if a crewmember is infected. This type of test, which can be done with a nasal swab, saliva specimen, or blood sample, needs to be sent to a lab to be analyzed. Analysis usually takes 24 hours, and it can take up to three days to get results back from the lab.

The time required for the test to be completed creates a logistical challenge for crews and operators. If crewmembers have to wait three days for results, they should be quarantined the whole time. Otherwise, they could be exposed after the sample was taken.

When results arrive, crewmembers who test positive should not be allowed on the vessel. While crewmembers who test negative are more likely to be healthy, it should be noted that not every test is 100% accurate. Any errors in collecting samples or analyzing samples could result in a false negative. To address this issue, some companies may require two negative results before boarding a vessel instead of one.

Another option is screening for coronavirus using a temperature check and questionnaire. Many onshore facilities are pursuing this option. While this method can help identify those who have COVID-19 symptoms, it does not detect people who are not displaying symptoms. These procedures are not likely to detect people who are asymptomatic.

When deciding between testing and screening, companies should evaluate their own unique risks. For example, onshore facilities, where people come and go every day, may not need to be as strict as a vessel, where a few people are sequestered together for weeks or more.

As part of this risk evaluation process, companies should also take into account the costs and challenges of evacuating a potential COVID-19 patient from offshore.

Complex Medical Evacuations

If a crewmember is potentially sick with coronavirus on a vessel, evacuation can become

more challenging than it was previously.

First, the medical evacuation provider has to have the proper equipment for transporting an infectious patient. Specialized isolation equipment will probably be required if the patient has coronavirus-like symptoms. While many medical evacuation providers are currently upgrading their equipment, this specialized equipment may be in high demand and harder to come by, potentially delaying the evacuation.

Second, coronavirus-specific regulations can complicate transportation once the patient arrives on land. Many countries demand a 14-day quarantine, which may make evacuating to the patient's home of record more challenging. Some countries may regulate COVID-19 patients themselves, effectively stripping the company's ability to oversee its employee's care. Other countries may have restricted flights or flight protocols. For example, some airstrips may have limited hours. All of these factors complicate getting the sick crewmember treated and safely home.

Companies need to work closely with their medical evacuation provider to adapt to the changing legislation and procedures due to coronavirus.

Augmenting HSE Departments

Health and safety are of utmost importance at sea. Most companies have rigorous requirements to keep crewmembers safe from injury and avoid the possibility of an expensive medical evacuation. However, COVID-19 is a new variable that can potentially change many of these standard procedures.

To understand how COVID-19 is changing the health and safety landscape, some marine companies are reaching out to medical companies for additional expertise. Medical staffing and services can support companies by providing telemedicine, medical evacuation, COVID-19 testing, medical equipment, and consulting on how to develop procedures and protocols to keep crewmembers safe.

Working with a medical expert can help marine companies develop a unique plan to keep their crewmembers safe and healthy whether onshore or at sea.



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