

560 customers of Saturn Cafe get inoculations

Business off at popular restaurant

By KATHERINE EDWARDS
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SANTA CRUZ — No new cases have been diagnosed, but business has plunged at the Saturn Cafe since a public health notice was issued warning patrons they may have been exposed to hepatitis A.

Some 560 customers have been inoculated against the virus since two restaurant workers tested positive for hepatitis A on May 5.

Meanwhile, owners of the popular Mission Street restaurant said Thursday that their business had dropped by half in the last week.

"I think people don't realize that it's really safe to eat at the Saturn at this point," said Melissa Sunberg, who co-owns the restaurant with her husband, Cary, and former Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane.

County health officials last week issued a rare bulletin warning cafe patrons that they may have been exposed to the virus between April 15 and May 5, when the two contagious employees were preparing cold food.

Since then, about 300 people have gone to county clinics to get

Please see SATURN CAFE — A6

A-6 — Friday, May 14, 1993 — Santa Cruz Sentinel

Saturn Cafe

Continued from Page A1

an immune gamma globulin injection to stave off any symptoms, said Barbara Fleming, county communicable disease control officer.

Another 260 flocked to the Cowell Health Center at UC Santa Cruz for the shot, prompting staff to stay late Friday, Saturday and Monday to meet the demand.

"It is slowing down today," Director George Wolfe said Thursday. "We're hoping we're pretty much done with this round."

Hepatitis A, a liver infection caused by a virus spread through feces, causes fever, fatigue, nausea and abdominal pain.

Although no new cases of hepatitis A have appeared, health officials said they would be keeping watch for any outbreak until mid-June, when the incubation period

ends.

"It's good news so far," Fleming said.

The county's environmental health officer will be checking in regularly with the cafe until the incubation period is safely passed, Fleming said, adding that the cafe is "doing really well" with enforcing health regulations with employees.

"We're really going overboard on cleanliness," said Sunberg.

The biggest battle, she said, has been against rumors that customers have become ill.

"We hope to let people know that nothing like that has happened," she said.

Sunberg said the restaurant has been flooded with phone calls from customers asking about the virus. About 100 people have come in to take up the cafe's offer to reimburse anyone who gets the \$10 injection at county clinics.

The cafe has spent \$1,000 reimbursing customers, Sunberg said, adding "I think that's really just the tip of the iceberg."

Standing in a virtually empty cafe early Thursday afternoon, Lane said the cafe wouldn't be able to stand the loss of business for long.

"See for yourself," he said, gesturing to the room.

Sunberg said the "silver lining"

to the whole episode has been the customers who have returned. "Since it's been so slow, we have a chance to really talk to some people," she said.

"I don't think this is going to be the end of the Saturn, it's just a question of if we can weather this period," she added.

The county clinics will continue to offer gamma globulin injections until Tuesday or Wednesday, said Fleming. The injection is effective only in the first two weeks after exposure.

For more information, call Fleming at 454-4114 or the cafe at 429-8505.