

# For NCAA tournament teams, germs can be toughest opponents



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(Photo: Bob Donnan, USA TODAY Sports)

Mostly, it was Duke. Maybe it was the turkey sandwich — or more likely, a routine stomach virus.

But on Sunday, when San Diego State's season ended in a 68-49 loss in the NCAA Tournament's round of 32, the battle was against more than the No. 1 seed Blue Devils.

Perhaps a dozen members of the Aztecs' traveling party, including head coach Steve Fisher and at least four players, experienced symptoms of nausea. Adding insult to the indignity of it all, their trip home was delayed because still more players were ill.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Tom Abdenour, San Diego State's head athletic trainer, who spent 24 years on staff with the NBA's Golden State Warriors. "A virus like this hits, it's like throwing a pebble in a still pond — it's like those rings in the water that go out. ... It comes up fast."

**NCAA TOURNAMENT:**[Bracket Hub \(http://brackethub.usatoday.com\)](http://brackethub.usatoday.com)

But anyone who's been involved in college basketball for any length of time has seen something like it. If not as severe, or at a less critical time, many have a similar story. And although athletic trainers cringe, just like the rest of us, over knee injuries and twisted ankles, they fear the flu and other illnesses.

"I've told a lot of people I'd rather have an injury because I can treat it," said Lance Schuemann, Wyoming's associate athletic trainer for men's basketball, who dealt this season with two players out because of mononucleosis symptoms (Larry Nance Jr. and sixth man Alan Herndon missed time in early February).

"If you have guys with mono, it's just time, healing and rest," Schuemann added. "There's nothing I can do to increase the healing or decrease the time out. You really have no answer."

That goes for the cold and flu, too. And if it seems viruses can do more damage to teams' performance in college basketball than, say, football or baseball, perhaps it's because of the smaller roster — fewer players, with each individual exponentially more important. But it might also be as simple as the calendar.



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College basketball season essentially coincides with cold and flu season. A 2008 study by scientists at the National Institutes of Health suggested an explanation for why the flu virus, specifically, is more infectious during the winter. The virus is spread through coughs and sneezes. But in colder temperatures, its outer coating hardens, making it more hardy. Once a virus finds its way inside a person's respiratory tract, the warmer temperatures soften the coating and free the flu for infection.

Never mind the science of when and why, though. For basketball teams, the calendar isn't changing. And given the nature of the sport — a couple dozen people constantly in close contact with each other, whether during practices or in locker rooms or on buses and planes, preventing illness and its rapid spread is especially difficult.

"You'll get flu bugs and maybe a guy's out a couple days," Wyoming's Schuemann said. " ... It's a good year if you don't really have a lot of missed days."

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There's no magic pill for prevention — and no cure when it strikes. To combat illness, several athletic trainers told USA TODAY Sports they continually emphasize the basics.

"Just normal hygiene stuff, but on overdrive," said Jennifer Nyland, an athletic trainer for Gonzaga.



Wyoming forwards Alan Herndon (32) and forward Larry Nance Jr. (22) defend against Colorado State forward Tiel Daniels in a game Jan. 7. (Photo: Ron Chenoy, USA TODAY Sports)

Oklahoma athletic trainer Alex Brown said players and staff members are offered flu shots before the season begins, though he noted the effectiveness varies from year to year. Players are instructed to wash their hands often, never to drink from someone else's cup, to stay hydrated, etc. The medical staffs try to ensure their home facilities have been thoroughly cleaned to reduce bacteria.

When someone falls ill, they isolate him — keeping them out of practices, making sure they're in their own hotel room without a roommate. When necessary, as when symptoms include vomiting or diarrhea, they give IVs, trying to prevent dehydration. They step up use of hand sanitizers and become more religious about wiping down common surfaces.

Mostly, they just wait — and hope the bug doesn't spread too far, too fast.

"Once you get one guy with it, it's so easy to get it just filtering through your team," Oklahoma's Brown said. "It only lasts 24 hours, usually — but if it's the wrong 24 hours?"

It can affect the outcome of a game. And maybe a season.

"It can be very detrimental," Schuermann said. "A lot of times you have youth on the bench that can't help you unless you're Kentucky. They could probably take a few illnesses and be all right."

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Perhaps. The Aztecs, as it turned out, could not.

The outbreak began with senior guard Aqeel Quinn last Thursday, the day before San Diego State's round of 64 game with St. John's in Charlotte, N.C. The initial suspicion — more like hope, considering the potential for contagion — was that Quinn had food poisoning from a turkey sandwich. He spent much of Thursday and Friday vomiting, and though he tried to play against St. John's, he spent the second half lying next to the bench.

Quinn said he was better on Sunday. But by then, the bug had spread throughout the team, the coaches and even their radio broadcaster. Fisher did not attend the team's film session Saturday night. An assistant coach didn't travel to the arena with the team, arriving just before tipoff against Duke.



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"It hit a lot of people, from coaches to players to coaches' wives, and that's not fun to deal with that," Fisher said. "But that had no impact on how we played, how we competed, what we did, how we played. That had no bearing on it."

But who's to know? Duke, by the way, dealt with the flu last week, too. Freshman guard Grayson Allen came down with it, along with a student manager. Jose Fonseca, an assistant athletic trainer, said they quarantined Allen, who lost eight pounds "because he could not eat. ... But they did get him healthy enough to play both games this weekend."

But the bug didn't bite the Blue Devils like the Aztecs. Quinn played against Duke, and said afterward he felt "pretty solid." But according to Abdenour, at least four other players — senior Dwayne Polee II, junior Angelo Choi and freshman Kevin Zabo and Malik Pope — were ill. Though all but Zabo played, they were affected to various degrees. Choi, who averaged almost 14 minutes, played only seven and didn't play in the second half.

"We were aggressive in dealing with it," Abdenour said. "But once someone has it, you just have to deal with the symptoms."

And depending on the timing, with the results.

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