

# Navy's Top Doctor: No Active COVID-19 Transmissions Aboard Ships Yet



The USNS Mercy will deploy to the West Coast to help with the care of patients in some hospitals that don't have COVID-19 so those hospitals can concentrate on treating patients with the virus. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Zach Kreitzer

ARLINGTON, Va – The U.S. Navy's top medical officer said that no COVID-19 cases have been detected on board Navy ships at sea.

"Because of those enhanced measures that were undertaken weeks ago, we have not seen active transmission," Rear Adm. Bruce Gillingham, surgeon general of the Navy said, during a March 19 virtual news conference at the Pentagon. "We believe [those ships] are essentially self-quarantined in place as units."

"The small handful of cases that we have had have been in ships that are in port, Gillingham said. "Those individuals have been immediately identified, isolated and, if requiring treatment, they have been provided appropriate treatment for their condition."

The admiral affirmed that social distancing is being observed to the maximum extent possible on the ships. Analysis of COVID tests is not yet available on ships; the tests are sent ashore for analysis.

He said that everyone boarding Navy ships is being screened for the virus. As a ship leaves port, it is not allowed to make a port call until it has been at sea for at least 14 days, the incubation period for the virus.

The Military Sealift Command is activating the hospital ships

USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy to relieve the burden of acute-care patients in some hospitals of patients without the COVID-19 virus so that the hospitals can concentrate on virus victims. The ships are being prepared for a 1,000-bed mission. The Comfort is being sent to New York City.

Gillingham said that the critical core crew for the USNS Mercy is reporting aboard and is being screened for the virus before being allowed on board. A decision of where to send the Mercy on the U.S. West Coast has not yet been made. The Mercy is scheduled to sail next week.

“We will be very careful in the development of our concept of operation of how to care for a community of patients [on the hospital ships],” Gillingham said. “Screening will be an essential part of that guidance.”