

# Medical Emergencies at Sea: Cruise Lines' Duty to Prioritize Passenger Care

*Maritime law requires ships to divert for urgent medical care. Yet cruise lines prioritize schedules over safety.*

NEW YORK, NY, UNITED STATES, November 26, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Maritime law ensures cruise passengers have rights to safety, medical care, and fair treatment during emergencies at sea. Cruise lines must provide professional onboard medical attention, maintain safe conditions, and keep passengers informed. These protections balance passenger welfare with the unique legal environment of ocean travel.

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*Jeff S. Korek*

"During a Medical Emergency, Maritime law requires that a ship divert its course to provide urgent or essential medical care to its passengers," said Jeff S. Korek, Senior Trial

Partner at GLK LAW, a New York-based personal injury law firm specializing in cruise ship litigation. "However, this legal duty often conflicts with cruise lines' operational priorities. Passengers need to understand what they're entitled to when emergencies happen at sea."

## Medical Emergencies Are Common at Sea

[With approximately 30 million cruise passengers worldwide](#) and one in every 14 seeking medical attention onboard, medical emergencies are far more common than many travelers realize. In 2025, the cruise industry faces unprecedented safety challenges: the CDC reported a record 20 gastrointestinal illness outbreaks on cruise ships through October, and the U.S. Department of Transportation documented 138 crimes through the third quarter.

[Approximately 200 passenger deaths occur annually](#), with an estimated 15 deaths per million passengers.

## Common Medical Treatment Failures

Cruise ship medical staff face competing interests that passengers should understand. Physicians sometimes underdiagnose injuries and encourage passengers to remain onboard until the next port. Medical staff may correctly diagnose problems but fail to insist the ship speed up or arrange helicopter evacuation. Misdiagnosis and wrong medications also occur.

Additionally, many cruise ship medical personnel are not U.S. licensed, and medical facilities often lack advanced diagnostic equipment like MRI or CT scan machines.

"These treatment failures aren't isolated," Korek noted. "They represent a pattern where urgent medical needs are weighed against schedule integrity and operational costs."

#### Know Your Rights: Understanding Your Passenger Ticket

Cruise ship passenger contracts contain restrictive clauses that significantly limit passenger recourse. Federal maritime law imposes strict timeframes—passengers may be required to file claims within six months and commence lawsuits within one year, far shorter than typical personal injury statutes of limitations.

Cruise lines limit claim locations to designated port cities like Miami, Seattle, and Los Angeles. For deaths beyond three nautical miles from U.S. shores, families face significant limitations on damages under the Death on the High Seas Act (DOHSA), restricted to financial losses and excluding emotional distress compensation.

"Passengers should read their ticket contracts carefully before sailing," Korek advised.

"Understanding these limitations allows you to make informed decisions about travel insurance and what steps to take immediately if an emergency occurs."

#### Consumer Protection Steps

Before booking, research the cruise line's safety record and purchase comprehensive travel insurance including medical evacuation coverage. During the cruise, seek immediate medical attention for concerning symptoms and request detailed documentation of all care provided. After an incident, consult a maritime law attorney immediately and file written notice within.

"Passengers deserve to know what they're getting when they book a cruise," Korek concluded.

"Clear information about medical facilities, emergency procedures, and legal rights allows consumers to make informed decisions and take appropriate precautions. Knowledge is the best protection."

#### About Jeff

Jeff S. Korek is the past President of the New York State Trial Lawyers Association and currently serves as Senior Trial Partner at GLK LAW. With nearly 40 years of experience in personal injury, cruise ship, aviation, and medical malpractice law, he is widely regarded as one of New York's leading trial lawyers. Korek has been named "Lawyer of the Year" in New York City by Best Lawyers three times — for Product Liability Litigation–Plaintiffs (2026), Medical Malpractice Law–Plaintiffs (2020), and Personal Injury Litigation–Plaintiffs (2016).

He was recently inducted into the invitation-only International Society of Barristers, a distinction reserved for the nation's top trial advocates. Korek is also frequently called upon by major media outlets to provide legal commentary and is widely recognized as a thought leader in his field. For

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