

Listeria Outbreak Linked to Queso Fresco and Cotija Cheese



Posted April 10, 2024

This outbreak is over. Learn what you can do to protect yourself from getting sick from Listeria.

Fast Facts

- Illnesses: 26
- Hospitalizations: 23
- Deaths: 2
- [States](#): 11
- Recall: Yes
- Investigation status: Closed (first posted on February 6, 2024)



Some of the recalled foods.



Some of the recalled cheeses.

Outbreak Summary

[Data](#) showed that queso fresco and cotija cheese made by Rizo-López Foods made people sick in this outbreak. Many foods including cheeses, crema, and yogurts were recalled. Recalled foods are past their shelf life.

See [FDA's website](#) for all recall notices.

What You Should Do

- **Know your *Listeria* risk.** If you are pregnant, aged 65 or older, or have a weakened immune system due to certain medical conditions or treatments, *Listeria* can be more harmful to you.
- **Choose [safer foods](#).** Find out which foods are more likely to be contaminated with *Listeria* and ways you can protect your health.
- **Be aware that fresh soft cheeses made with pasteurized milk have caused *Listeria* outbreaks, including this one.** Although pasteurization of milk kills *Listeria*, soft cheeses made from pasteurized milk can still get contaminated during cheese-making.

Listeria Symptoms

- *Listeria* is especially harmful to people who are pregnant, aged 65 or older, or have weakened immune systems. This is because *Listeria* is more likely to spread beyond their gut to other parts of their body, resulting in a severe condition known as invasive listeriosis.
 - **For people who are pregnant**, *Listeria* can cause pregnancy loss, premature birth, or a life-threatening infection in their newborn.
 - **For people who are 65 years or older or who have a weakened immune system**, *Listeria* often results in hospitalization and sometimes death.
- Symptoms usually start within 2 weeks after eating food contaminated with *Listeria*, but may start as early as the same day or as late as 10 weeks after.
 - **Pregnant people** usually have fever, muscle aches, and tiredness.
 - **People who are not pregnant** usually have fever, muscle aches, and tiredness. They may also get a headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or seizures.

Investigation Details

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February 6, 2024

CDC, public health and regulatory officials in several states, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) collected [different types of data](#) to investigate a multistate outbreak of *Listeria monocytogenes* infections.

Epidemiologic and laboratory data showed that queso fresco and cotija cheese made by Rizo-López Foods made people in this outbreak sick.

Epidemiologic Data

A total of 26 people infected with the outbreak strain of *Listeria* were reported from 11 states (see [map](#)). Illnesses started on dates ranging from June 15, 2014, to December 10, 2023 (see [timeline](#)). Of 26 people with

information available, 23 had been hospitalized. Two deaths were reported, one from California and one from Texas.

Among people who are pregnant, *Listeria* can cause pregnancy loss, premature birth, or a life-threatening infection in their newborn. In this outbreak, two people got sick during their pregnancy and one person had a pregnancy loss. There were also two newborns with *Listeria* infections.

The true number of sick people in this outbreak was likely higher than the number reported, and the outbreak may not have been limited to the states with known illnesses. This is because some people recover without medical care and are not tested for *Listeria*. In addition, recent illnesses may not yet have been reported as it usually takes [3 to 4 weeks](#) to determine if a sick person is part of an outbreak.

Public health officials collected many different types of information from sick people, including their age, race, ethnicity, other demographics, and the foods they ate in the month before they got sick. This information provided clues to help investigators identify the source of the outbreak.

The table below has information about sick people in this outbreak (“n” is the number of people with information available for each demographic).

Table of demographic information (n is the number of people with information available)

Demographics	Information
Age (n=26)	Range from <1 to 88 years Median age of 52
Sex (n=26)	58% female 42% male
Race (n=21)	71% White 5% Native American or Alaska Native 24% reported another race category
Ethnicity (n=26)	85% Hispanic 15% non-Hispanic

State and local public health officials interviewed people about the foods they ate in the month before they got sick. Of the 22 people interviewed, 16 (73%) reported eating queso fresco, cotija, or other similar cheeses. Among people who remembered specific brands, four people reported eating brands made by Rio Lopez.

Laboratory Data

Public health investigators used the [PulseNet](#) system to identify illnesses that may have been part of this outbreak. CDC PulseNet manages a national database of DNA fingerprints of bacteria that cause foodborne illnesses. DNA fingerprinting is performed on bacteria using a method called [whole genome sequencing \(WGS\)](#).

WGS showed that bacteria from sick people's samples from 2014 to present are closely related genetically. This suggested that people in this outbreak got sick from the same food.

In January 2024, the Hawaii State Department of Health's Food and Drug Branch collected a sample of aged cotija cheese product made by Rizo-López Foods during routine sampling. Testing identified the outbreak strain of *Listeria* in the product.

FDA conducted inspections at the Rizo-López Foods facility and collected food and environmental samples for testing. FDA found the outbreak strain from two environmental samples that were collected at the facility.

Public Health Actions

On January 11, 2024, Rizo-López Foods, Inc. [recalled](#) the aged cotija cheese product after Hawaii state officials found *Listeria* in it. On February 6, 2024, Rizo-López Foods, Inc. [recalled](#) all cheese and other dairy products made in their facility.