

Decatur E. coli strain not most common

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June 23--MONTGOMERY -- An official with the Alabama Department of Health said this morning that the E. coli strain found during an investigation of illnesses in Decatur isn't the type normally associated with outbreaks.

As of late last week, 19 people had reported gastrointestinal illness, including nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, according to the health department.

Dr. Mary McIntyre of the Department of Public Health said this morning that while E. coli and salmonella were found in some samples, the E. coli was not the strain known as "0157." According to the Centers for Disease Control, the 0157 strain is most often associated with E. coli outbreaks. Less is known about other strains, according to the CDC's website, but some can cause severe illness, including diarrhea and kidney failure.

More than 200 people attended the luncheon May 30 at Bridge Builders Church on Beltline Road. It was meant to inform seniors on topics such as safety, health and access to services.

The meal was provided by a caterer, but McIntyre, assistant state health officer, said that the department couldn't clearly link the illnesses to the food provider. She wouldn't release its name.

"Since notification to public health occurred more than a week past the event, there was no food to test and thus there will be no way to ever definitively link this outbreak to this event or to a definitive source," McIntyre said in an email to The Daily.

The meal was provided by Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, but that group has provided no answers about the reported illnesses, and Michael Tubbs, executive director of Community Action Partnership in Decatur, said the illnesses contracted by many of his organization's guests at the event created a "crisis" at CAPNA. Tubbs said this morning that the extension service has contacted him and wants to meet this week.

Clarence Hampton, 71, died six days after the luncheon, which featured chicken with a cream sauce, a salad and roll. His sister, Betty Bass, believes her brother died as a result of eating the food. Bass said she was diagnosed with E. coli. "I still feel bad," she said Friday.

Autopsy results on Hampton had not been returned, and McIntyre said last week the cause of death remained unconfirmed. Bass said her brother suffered from kidney problems, but she doesn't believe they were severe enough to cause his death. He was not receiving dialysis treatments, she said.

Of the 19 identified reports of gastrointestinal illness, outside lab results were obtained on nine, McIntyre said. One tested positive for E. coli, one tested positive for salmonella and a third tested positive for E. coli and salmonella. The others were negative, McIntyre said. None of these results were confirmed by the state lab. Results are pending on one specimen at the state lab.