

Minnesota Health Department: Bacteria in food likely cause of 100+ inmates getting sick at county jail

By [Mara H. Gottfried](#) | mgottfried@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press
PUBLISHED: October 2, 2017 at 5:40 pm | UPDATED: October 2, 2017 at 10:39 pm

Bacteria in food was probably what sickened 137 inmates at the Ramsey County jail recently, according to testing by the Minnesota Department of Health.

Early Sept. 9, [people at the jail in St. Paul began complaining of stomach pain](#), diarrhea and vomiting. Nurses treated inmates at the jail and none had to be hospitalized.

The jail notified the Minnesota Department of Health and St. Paul-Ramsey County Public Health. State health officials said they tested sample trays of food served for lunch and dinner Sept. 8 and a bacteria called *Clostridium perfringens* was found in a sample of tamale pie and in rice.

“*C. perfringens* is a common bacteria that lives in the environment and can be a common cause of bacterial intoxication if food is not handled appropriately with respect to time and temperature,” Amy Saupe, a foodborne-disease epidemiologist, wrote in an email.

“Due to the difficulty of this type of food testing, these results are not sufficient on their own to implicate this food,” Saupe said. “However, the identification of *C. perfringens* in the tamale pie support other investigation findings. Bacterial intoxication, specifically *C. perfringens* enterotoxin, was the likely cause of the outbreak.”

The Ramsey County sheriff’s office has a contract with Summit Food Service to provide and serve food at the jail. There were no additional cases reported outside of the Ramsey County jail, according to a Health Department spokesman.

“Food safety is our top priority, and we continuously work to ensure our food service operations comply with the standards of our company and our facilities,” Doug Warner, Summit Food Service spokesman, said in a statement. “While food has not been conclusively identified as the source of the symptoms at Ramsey County jail, we take these issues very seriously, and have been working closely with the health department and our client.”

Shakita Riley said her fiance, Justin Reynolds, called her from the jail during the outbreak and told her he kept having to use the bathroom and had fever, chills and vomiting. Reynolds said his stomach cramping lasted several days.

“He said, ‘I think we got food poisoning,’” Riley said. She said she could hear other inmates in the background talking about how sick they were.

Reynolds, who has been jailed since July and is awaiting trial in a [fatal shooting outside a St. Paul bar](#), has mostly avoided eating the jail-issued food since he became sick in September. But other options are limited — he’s been buying noodles from the vending machine, Riley said.

Andrew Noel, a Minneapolis-based lawyer, said his firm has heard from about 25 inmates who were sickened. They are collecting information and haven’t made a decision about whether they’ll file a lawsuit, Noel said.

St. Paul-Ramsey County Public Health conducted an environmental health assessment of food service at the jail and still has an active investigation, according to John Siqveland, county spokesman.

If there are not changes to the state Health Department’s analysis, “interventions put in place” by public health staff after the outbreak “would be sufficient to address any comparable food safety issues and prevent future illness,” Siqveland said. “We are monitoring the vendor to ensure compliance and will continue to do so.”

SOURCE: <http://www.twincities.com/2017/10/02/minnesota-health-department-bacteria-in-food-likely-cause-of-100-inmates-being-sickened-at-ramsey-county-jail/>