



The Valley Oak Food and Fuel gas station in Walnut Grove has been linked to 10 cases of botulism, including one fatality, California health officials said.

## **Nacho cheese botulism appears to be isolated to Sacramento area gas station**

By Sammy Caiola

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California health officials believe there is no ongoing risk of botulism after testing several bags of nacho cheese sauce from the Valley Oak Food and Fuel gas station in Walnut Grove.

Ten people from four counties contracted the rare and sometimes fatal form of food poisoning after eating nacho cheese sauce from the gas station's small market. One Antioch man, Martin Galindo-Larios Jr., died from the illness last week. Sacramento County health officials said the other patients were hospitalized and in serious condition. The gas station stopped selling the cheese sauce May 5.

Inspectors recently confiscated an open five-pound bag of Gehl Foods jalapeño cheese sauce from the station, which tested positive for the toxin that causes botulism. Another sealed bag of cheese sauce from the station tested negative for the toxin, the state health department confirmed Thursday.

"This foodborne outbreak appears linked to Jalapeño Cheese Sauce dispensed only at Valley Oak Food and Fuel in Walnut Grove, California," the department said in a statement. "The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) do not have any evidence to suggest additional Jalapeño Cheese Sauce is contaminated."

Gehl Foods representatives said in a statement earlier this week that there has not been a recall of their nacho cheese product. Samples of nacho cheese sauce taken from the Gehl Foods facility in Wisconsin tested negative for the botulism toxin, according to the statement.

The Walnut Grove gas station did not answer its telephone Thursday.

The family of Sacramento resident Lavinia Kelly, who contracted botulism after eating food bought at the gas station, filed a lawsuit against the station in Sacramento Superior Court on May 16 for negligence, product liability and breach of implied warranty. At least five other people have sued the gas station in relation to the botulism case.

Botulism contamination happens when botulinum bacteria multiply, creating a nerve toxin. That's most likely to happen in moist, low-oxygen environments, according to Linda Harris, a food safety microbiologist at UC Davis.

Botulinum bacteria are heat-proof, and warming foods actually helps them grow, Harris said earlier this month. Cooking food, sealing it and not refrigerating it also increase risk of contamination as do improper home canning practices, she said. A gas station is "not the typical type of place where you'd expect botulism to be an issue," Harris said.

"When we cook food we usually eat it right away, we refrigerate it," Harris said. "We do things that are meant to control this."

Sammy Caiola: 916-321-1636, @SammyCaiola

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