

E. coli Outbreak with Unknown Food Source



Investigation Notice

Posted March 11, 2021

This outbreak is over. Always follow the four steps to food safety: clean, separate, cook, chill.

Fast Facts

- Illnesses: 22
- Hospitalizations: 11
- Deaths: 1
- [States](#): 7
- Recall: No
- Investigation status: Closed

What You Should Do

Always follow these four food safety steps to prevent getting sick from *E. coli*:

- **Clean:** Wash your hands, utensils, and surfaces often. Wash fruits and vegetables before eating, cutting, or peeling.
- **Separate:** Keep food that won't be cooked separate from raw meat, poultry, and seafood.
- **Cook:** Use a food thermometer to make sure you have cooked your food to a temperature high enough to kill germs.
- **Chill:** Refrigerate foods that go bad within 2 hours (within 1 hour if it is hotter than 90°F). Thaw food in the refrigerator, not on the counter.

Investigation Details

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CDC, public health and regulatory officials in several states, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA-FSIS) collected and analyzed different types of data but were unable to identify the food source of this multistate outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7 infections.

As of March 11, 2021, this outbreak is over.

Epidemiologic Data

As of March 10, 2021, a total of 22 people infected with the outbreak strain were reported from 7 states. Illnesses started on dates ranging from December 18, 2020, to January 12, 2021.

Sick people ranged in age from 10 to 95 years, with a median age of 28, and 68% were female. Of 20 people with information available, 11 were hospitalized. Of 18 people with information, 3 developed a type of kidney failure called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). One death was reported from Washington.

State and local public health officials interviewed people about the foods they ate in the week before they got sick. CDC analyzed the interview data and did not identify a specific food item as a potential source of this outbreak. People reported eating a variety of food items, including leafy greens, broccoli, cucumbers, and strawberries. However, none of the food items were reported significantly more by sick people in this outbreak when compared to healthy people in the FoodNet population survey.

Laboratory and Traceback Data

Public health investigators used the [PulseNet](#) system to identify illnesses that were 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 were closely related genetically. This means that people in this outbreak likely got sick from eating the same food.

WGS predicted that bacteria from 14 people's samples were resistant to all of the following antibiotics: chloramphenicol, streptomycin, sulfisoxazole, tetracycline, and trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole. [CDC's National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System \(NARMS\)](#) laboratory is currently conducting standard antibiotic resistance testing. These findings do not affect treatment options for people in this outbreak. This is because antibiotics are not recommended for treating *E. coli* O157:H7 illnesses.

WGS also showed that this outbreak strain was previously linked to various sources, including [romaine lettuce](#) and recreational water.

FDA conducted traceback investigations on several produce items but did not identify a common source or potential point of contamination.