

Listeria Outbreak Linked to Queso Fresco Made by El Abuelito Cheese Inc.

[Español \(Spanish\)](#)



Food Safety Alert

Posted May 14, 2021

This outbreak is over. Even when there are no ongoing outbreaks, do not eat soft cheeses like queso fresco, unless they are labeled “made with pasteurized milk.” This is especially important for people who are at higher risk for *Listeria* illness.

Fast Facts

- Illnesses: 13
- Hospitalizations: 12
- Deaths: 1
- [States](#): 4
- Recall: Yes
- Investigation status: Closed



What You Should Do

- **Don't eat any soft cheeses like queso fresco, unless they are labeled “made with pasteurized milk.”** This is especially important if you are

pregnant, aged 65 or older, or have a weakened immune system due to certain medical conditions or treatments. This is because you are at higher risk for severe *Listeria* illness.

- **Be aware that Hispanic-style fresh and soft cheeses made with pasteurized milk have caused *Listeria* outbreaks, including this outbreak.** Although pasteurization of milk kills *Listeria*, soft cheeses made from pasteurized milk can still become contaminated if they are produced in facilities with unsanitary conditions.

Investigation Details

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In February 2021, CDC, public health and regulatory officials in several states, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) began collecting different types of data to investigate a multistate outbreak of *Listeria monocytogenes* infections.

Epidemiologic and laboratory data showed that queso fresco cheeses made by El Abuelito Cheese Inc. were contaminated with *Listeria* and made people sick.

As of May 14, 2021, this outbreak is over.

Epidemiologic Data

A total of 13 people infected with the outbreak strain of *Listeria monocytogenes* were reported from 4 states. Illnesses started on dates ranging from October 20, 2020, to March 17, 2021, with 12 illnesses occurring in 2021.

Sick people ranged in age from less than 1 to 75 years, with a median age of 52. Twelve people were Hispanic, and seven people were female. Twelve people were hospitalized, and one death was reported from Maryland. Four people got sick during their pregnancy, resulting in two pregnancy losses and one premature birth; the fourth person remained pregnant after recovering.

State and local public health officials interviewed people about the foods they ate in the month before they got sick. Of the 11 people interviewed, eight (73%) people reported eating Hispanic-style fresh and soft cheeses. Among the eight people, seven (88%) reported eating queso fresco – four specifically reported brands made by El Abuelito Cheese Inc, including El Abuelito brand and Rio Grande brand.

Laboratory 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 the same food.

Connecticut officials collected samples of El Abuelito brand Hispanic-style fresh and soft cheeses for testing from a store where a sick person reported buying these types of cheeses. On February 19, WGS showed that the *Listeria* bacteria in El Abuelito brand queso fresco were closely related to the *Listeria* bacteria from sick people in this outbreak. This means that people likely got sick from eating this cheese.

Public Health Actions

On February 19, El Abuelito Cheese Inc. recalled all queso fresco products made at their facility. They also stopped producing and distributing all their products.

On February 27, El Abuelito Cheese Inc. expanded their recall to include all quesillo and requeson products that were made or packed at the same facility as the contaminated queso fresco.

The outbreak was declared over on May 14 2021.