

Public Health Notice: Outbreak of *Salmonella* infections linked to red onions imported from the United States

October 1, 2020 - Final Update

This notice has been updated to advise that the outbreak appears to be over and the outbreak investigation has been closed. Onions imported from the United States are no longer under investigation.

Why should you take note

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) collaborated with federal and provincial public health partners, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC) and the US Food and Drug Administration to investigate an outbreak of *Salmonella* infections that occurred in seven provinces. Given that *Salmonella* illness reporting linked to this outbreak has significantly decreased over the last three weeks, the outbreak appears to be over and the investigation has been closed.

Investigation findings identified exposure to red onions imported from the USA as a likely source of the outbreak. Many of the ill individuals reported having eaten red onions before getting sick.

Through a collaborative investigation between public health and food safety partners in Canada and the U.S., traceback information identified that the contaminated red onions were coming from Thomson International Inc. of Bakersfield, California, USA.

The CFIA issued food recall warnings for related products that came to Canada. Canadians are advised not to eat any recalled products or any foods containing recalled products.

Onions grown in Canada were not associated with this outbreak.

Investigation summary

In total, there were 515 confirmed cases of *Salmonella* Newport illness linked to this outbreak in the following provinces: British Columbia (121), Alberta (293), Saskatchewan (35), Manitoba (26), Ontario (14), Quebec (25) and Prince Edward Island (1).

Individuals became sick between mid-June and late-August 2020. Seventy-nine individuals were hospitalized. Three people died, but *Salmonella* did not contribute to the cause of these deaths. Individuals who became ill were between 1 and 100 years of age. The majority of cases (54%) were female.

Individuals who were ill reported eating red onions at home, in menu items ordered at restaurants and in residential care settings.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) conducted a food safety investigation and issued related food recall warnings. More information on recalled products is available on CFIA's website.

The U.S. CDC also reported an outbreak of *Salmonella* Newport illnesses with a similar genetic fingerprint to illnesses reported in Canada.

Who is most at risk

Anyone can become sick with a *Salmonella* infection, but children aged 5 years and under, older adults, pregnant women or people with weakened immune systems are at higher risk for contracting serious illness.

Most people who become ill from a *Salmonella* infection will recover fully after a few days. It is possible for some people to be infected with the bacteria and to not get sick or show any symptoms, but to still be able to spread the infection to others.

What should you do to protect your health

- Do not eat any recalled food products. Check to see if you have recalled food products at home. If you do, throw them out and wash your hands.
- If you have been diagnosed with a *Salmonella* infection or any other gastrointestinal illness, do not cook food for other people.
- Contact your local public health authority to report any food safety concerns at restaurants or grocery stores, or if you suspect food poisoning from a restaurant or other food establishments.

Symptoms

Symptoms of a [*Salmonella* infection](#), called salmonellosis, typically start 6 to 72 hours after exposure to *Salmonella* bacteria from an infected animal, person or contaminated product.

Symptoms include:

- fever
- chills
- diarrhea
- abdominal cramps
- headache
- nausea
- vomiting

These symptoms usually last for 4 to 7 days. In healthy people, salmonellosis often clears up without treatment, but sometimes antibiotics may be required. In some cases, severe illness may occur and hospitalization may be required. People who are infected with *Salmonella* bacteria can be infectious from several days to several weeks. People who experience symptoms, or who have underlying medical conditions, should contact their health care provider if they suspect they have a *Salmonella* infection.

What is the Government of Canada doing

The Government of Canada is committed to protecting the health of Canadians from enteric disease outbreaks.

The Public Health Agency of Canada leads the human health investigation into an outbreak and is in regular contact with its federal, provincial and territorial partners to monitor the situation and to collaborate on steps to address an outbreak.

Health Canada provides food-related health risk assessments to determine whether the presence of a certain substance or microorganism poses a health risk to consumers.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency conducts food safety investigations into the possible food source of an outbreak.

The Government of Canada will update Canadians if new information related to this investigation becomes available.

Epidemiological information

Figure 1 is an epidemiological curve for this outbreak, which shows the numbers of new cases by week. Outbreak investigators use this information to show when illnesses begin, when they peak and when they trail off. It can take several weeks from the time a person becomes ill to when the illness is reported and testing confirms a link to the outbreak. Data are available for 515 cases.

Figure 1: Number of people infected with *Salmonella* Newport

