

Investigation Update: *E. coli* Outbreak, Organic Walnuts - April 2024

KEY POINTS

- Organic walnuts distributed by Gibson Farms, Inc. may be contaminated with *E. coli* and may be making people sick.
- If you bought organic walnut halves and pieces from bulk containers, see if yours might be part of the recall.



Bulk organic walnuts

Latest update

July 9, 2024

CDC, public health and regulatory officials in several states, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) collected [different types of data](#) to investigate a multistate outbreak of *E. coli* O157 infections.

Epidemiologic and traceback data showed that organic walnuts distributed by Gibson Farms, Inc. were contaminated with *E. coli* and made people sick.

As of June 25, 2024, this outbreak is over.

Epidemiologic Data

A total of 13 people infected with the outbreak strain of *E. coli* were reported from 2 states. Illnesses started on dates ranging from February 1, 2024, to April 4, 2024. Of 13 people with information available, 7 (54%) were hospitalized. Two patients developed hemolytic uremic syndrome, a serious condition that can cause kidney failure. No deaths were reported.

The true number of sick people in this outbreak was likely much higher than the number reported, and the outbreak may not have been limited to the states with known illnesses. This is because many people recover without medical care and are not tested for *E. coli*.

Public health officials collected many different types of information from sick people, including their age, race, ethnicity, other demographics, and the foods they ate in the week before they got sick. This information provided clues to help investigators identify the source of the outbreak.

The list below has information about sick people in this outbreak (“n” is the number of people with information available for each demographic).

- Age (n=13): Range from 6 to 84 years, Median of 60 years
- Sex (n=13): 62% female, 38% male
- Race (n=11): 91% White, 9% African American/Black
- Ethnicity (n=11): 100% non-Hispanic

State and local public health officials interviewed people about the foods they ate in the week before they got sick. Of the 11 people interviewed, all 11 (100%) reported eating walnuts. This percentage was significantly higher than the 26% of respondents who reported eating walnuts in the [FoodNet Population Survey](#)—a survey that helps estimate how often people eat various foods linked to diarrheal illness. This difference suggested that people in this outbreak got sick from eating walnuts. Of 11 people interviewed, almost all reported buying organic walnuts from bulk bins in food co-ops or natural food stores. Investigators identified two illness subclusters of two people each who purchased bulk bin walnuts from the same store location.

Laboratory and Traceback Data

Public health investigators used the [PulseNet](#) system to identify illnesses that may be 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 suggests that people in this outbreak got sick from the same food.

[WGS analysis](#) of bacteria from 12 people's samples did not predict resistance to any antibiotics. More information is available at the [National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System \(NARMS\)](#) site. These findings do not affect treatment guidance since antibiotics are not recommended for patients with Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* infections.

Traceback data collected by FDA determined that Gibson Farms, Inc was the supplier of organic walnuts sold in bulk bins at stores where ill people shopped.