Over 50 people fall ill following potluck event in Accomack County

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, most people get salmonella from contaminated foods.

Author: Leila Cox

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ACCOMACK COUNTY, Va. — Dozens of possible salmonella or other bacterial illness cases are being investigated in Accomack County after a local hospital reported an influx of emergency department visits related to a foodborne illness.

Leaders with the Accomack County Health Department said a large group of people potentially contracted salmonella or another type of bacteria at a private, potluck-style event.

This comes after Riverside Shore Memorial Hospital reported 52 patients walking into the emergency department with "foodborne infectious diarrheal illness" between Sunday and Tuesday.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), salmonella cases are more common in the summer season. A combination of warm weather and unrefrigerated foods can cause salmonella bacteria to grow more easily.

Although the Accomack County Health Department indicated they believe the foodborne illnesses were contracted at a private event, an emergency medicine doctor at Riverside Shore Memorial Hospital said the illness could happen to anyone, anywhere.

"You are consuming these bacteria all the time, your immune system is just awesome at fighting them off," said Dr. Ryan McAtee, "But with a big enough dose, the healthiest, youngest person is going to have terrible illnesses."

Diarrhea, fever, stomach cramps, and muscle aches are common signs that one could be dealing with a foodborne illness.

"The nice thing about dangerous foodborne illnesses is that they are not a silent disease," said McAtee.

Still, McAtee told 13News Now that there are several ways you can protect yourself from foodborne illnesses.

"Number one is hand hygiene. You've got to be washing your hands while preparing food and before you eat it. The second is in the preparation. Bacteria thrive at middle temperatures, from 140 degrees Fahrenheit to 40 degrees Fahrenheit. So you need to do everything you can to keep your food out of that range," said McAtee.

Other prevention tips include using separate cooking utensils to prevent cross-contamination and ensuring proper storage of hot and cold foods.

McAtee also leads the Infection Prevention Team at Riverside Shore Memorial Hospital and said the influx of patients dealing with foodborne infectious diarrheal illnesses is still in recovery.

Eastern Shore Health District Health Director Jon Richardson told 13News Now that the department conducts an epidemiological investigation to determine the appropriate course of action for salmonella and other bacterial outbreaks.