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Topeka Mexican restaurant closed after guests contract food poisoning

Carniceria Camecuaro could be closed until later this week

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By Aly Van Dyke

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An East Topeka Mexican restaurant and meat market has been forced to temporarily close after more than 20 people reportedly became sick after eating its food.

Carniceria Camecuaro, 1016 S.E. 6th, has been closed since Sunday after the Kansas Department of Agriculture advised it to shut down.

Manager Carmen Jaramillo confirmed the restaurant was closed Tuesday.

"We have done business for seven years. This is the first time we have this kind of problem when some persons became sick from the food," she said.

Carniceria Camecuaro will remain closed while KDA conducts follow-up inspections and directs potentially contaminated food to be thrown out. The staff also has to undergo further training regarding food safety codes. Depending on how that goes, the establishment could be open within the week, said Charlie Hunt, epidemiologist with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

KDA and KDHE, which handles food-borne illness outbreaks, were advised of the issue Sunday when a local hospital reported at least four people suffering from food poisoning after eating at the restaurant, Hunt said.

Additional complaints have come in, he said, estimating that more than 20 people were affected by the restaurant's food. Based on interviews, he said, the culprit looks to be the pork carnitas.

Although the investigation continues, the current hypothesis was that the food-borne illness was caused by a bacterium known as staphylococcus aureus, Hunt said.

Food can contract the bacterium when protein-high foods are left out of temperature — between about 40 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit — for more than four hours. Even if the meat is reheated, Hunt said, the toxin created by the bacterium is heat-resistant. People usually report food sickness — typically manifested by nausea, vomiting and diarrhea — within an hour of consuming the food, he said.

The last time Carniceria Camecuaro was cited for holding food out of temperature was March 14, 2012.

Its last KDA food inspection was April 12, 2012, during which it was written up for three critical violations.

Two related to raw pork being stored incorrectly, including a bag “of raw potatoes sitting on floor directly under package of raw pork that was dripping onto bag.”

Similar violations were noted on its March 14 and 26 inspections last year. The restaurant was issued a summary order — the first step in disciplinary action — after failing its March 17, 2011, inspection.

KDHE conducted 28 food-borne illness outbreaks last year, Hunt said. The agency only investigates complaints when they stem from more than one household, he said, adding that the Shawnee County case is above average.

“It’s a larger outbreak, I would say,” Hunt said. “We’ve got several people working on this.”

KDHE issues news releases regarding food-borne illnesses if there is an imminent threat to the public, he said. That wasn’t necessary in this case, he explained, because the restaurant closed.

If you think you have food poisoning, call the KDHE hotline at (877) 427-7317.

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