

E. coli Outbreak Affecting Oregon, Other States, Traced to Spinach

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Oregon public health officials have joined those in at least eight other states in investigating an outbreak of E. coli O157, a foodborne illness that has been identified in at least five people across Oregon.

Epidemiologists in the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) and in Wisconsin have traced the illness to packaged, washed spinach, although they so far have been unable to identify whether the contamination is confined to a single brand.

"We have reports of cases of E. coli O157 illness in Oregon, Idaho, Washington, Wisconsin, Utah, New Mexico, Connecticut, Indiana and Michigan," DHS epidemiologist Bill Keene said Thursday afternoon. "Although we have identified packaged spinach as the source, people have either varying or no recollection of the brand they purchased."

Keene said that epidemiologists are asking people who have become ill for credit and cash-register receipts they received when they made the purchase. "We're now trying to pin down the brand," he said. Although five persons' illness has been confirmed by the state public health laboratory, he said, state epidemiologists have received reports of illness in several dozen people and are working with them as well.

State public health officials are urging people who develop diarrhea after eating raw spinach to call their local health departments. Those who have bloody diarrhea or are particularly ill should seek medical attention and tell their doctors if they ate uncooked spinach. "Most people who ate the spinach will not get sick," Keene said. "If you ate spinach and aren't ill, there's no need to call your doctor."

Keene said DHS has notified the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which is working with the affected states, and the Oregon Department of Agriculture. Wisconsin public health officials have reported 19 cases and one death, he said.

E. coli O157 is a foodborne infection that also can be passed from person to person unless ill persons wash their hands diligently after using the toilet. The infection often causes bloody diarrhea and abdominal cramps, which usually go away in five to 10 days. However, patients in about 5 percent of cases suffer kidney failure. "This is one of the more serious foodborne infections," said Keene.

Public health officials cite these as primary protections against E. coli O157 infection:

* Thoroughly cook ground beef and hamburger. Keep raw meat separate from ready-to-eat foods. Wash hands, counters and utensils with hot soapy water after exposure to raw meat. * Drink only pasteurized milk, juice or cider. * Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly, especially those that will not be cooked. * Always wash hands after using the toilet.

Keene said DHS would name the brand of the contaminated product publicly as soon as it is identified.

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