



Multistate Outbreak of *E. Coli* Infections Linked to Romaine Lettuce

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Updated: December 04, 2019, December 19, 2019, January 15, 2020

Outbreak Status: Over

The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) worked with the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and public health and regulatory officials in several states on a multistate outbreak of Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 infections linked to romaine lettuce.

- *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) are a large and diverse group of bacteria found in the environment, foods, and intestines of people and animals.
- Symptoms of *E. coli* vary but most people infected develop diarrhea that is often bloody, vomiting, fever and abdominal cramps anywhere between 1-10 days after eating or drinking something that contains the bacteria and illness typically lasts 5 to 7 days.
- Some kinds of *E. coli* make a toxin called Shiga toxin and these bacteria are called ‘Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* or STEC for short. The most commonly identified STEC in North America is *E. coli* O157:H7; others in the STEC group are called non-O157 STEC.
- Individuals usually recover without treatment however in some people, the diarrhea may be severe enough to require hospitalization.
- Some types of STEC frequently cause severe disease, including bloody diarrhea and hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) which is a severe complication characterized by renal failure.
- We encourage people to contact their health care provider if they have diarrhea that lasts for more than 3 days or if diarrhea is accompanied by high fever, blood in the stool, or so much vomiting that they cannot keep liquids down and they pass very little urine.
- Children younger than 5 years, adults older than 65 years, and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to have severe illness.

Outbreak Summary:

	Case Count	States/Counties	Illness Onset Range
National	167	27	09/24/19 - 12/21/19
NJ	9	6	10/28/19 – 11/11/19

Key Points:

- As of January 15, 2020; 167 people infected with the outbreak strain of *E. coli* O157:H7 have been reported from 27 states. Illnesses started on dates from September 20, 2019, to December 21, 2019. Ill people range in age from less than 1 to 89 years, with a median age of 27 years and 64% are female. Of 165 people with information available, 85 people have been hospitalized, including 15 people who developed Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome, a type of kidney failure. No deaths have been reported.
- NJ has 9 cases associated with this outbreak from 5 counties; Atlantic (1), Burlington (3), Camden (1), Cumberland (1), Monmouth (1) and Ocean (2). Illness onsets range from October 28, 2019, to November 11, 2019, ill people range in age from 13 to 52 years, 78% are male, 7 ill people were hospitalized and discharged and none developed HUS. No deaths have been reported.



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- Epidemiologic and traceback evidence indicated that romaine lettuce harvested from the Salinas, California growing region was a likely source of the outbreak.
- Contaminated romaine lettuce that made people sick in this outbreak from the Salinas Valley growing region in California is no longer available for sale.
- CDC is no longer advising that people avoid romaine lettuce from the Salinas Valley growing region in California.

Advice to Clinicians:

- Some studies have shown that administering antibiotics to patients with *E. coli* O157 infections might increase their risk of developing hemolytic uremic syndrome (a type of kidney failure), and the benefit of antibiotic treatment has not been clearly demonstrated. Antibiotics are not routinely recommended for patients with *E. coli* O157 infections or for patients in whom *E. coli* O157 infection is suspected.

Additional Resources:

- <https://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/2019/o157h7-11-19/index.html> (CDC Investigation Notice)
- <https://academic.oup.com/cid/article/65/12/e45/4557073> 2017 (IDSA Practice Guidelines)
- <https://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/index.html> (CDC *E. coli* Homepage)
- <https://www.fda.gov/food/outbreaks-foodborne-illness/investigation-e-coli-o157h7-outbreak-linked-romaine-salinas-california-november-2019> (FDA)
- <https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/foodborne.shtml> (NJDOH Foodborne Illness Homepage)