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

**Posted:** November 21, 2018  
**Outbreak Status:** Ongoing

The New Jersey Department of Health is working with the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and public health and regulatory officials in Canada and several states on a multistate outbreak of Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 (STEC 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-0157 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:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Case Count</th>
<th>States/Counties</th>
<th>Illness Onset Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10/08/18 - 10/31/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10/18/18 - 10/21/18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Points:**

- As of October 15, 2018; 32 people infected with the outbreak strain of E. coli O157:H7 have been reported from 11 states. Illnesses started on dates from October 8, 2017, to October 31, 2018. Ill people range in age from 7 to 84 years, with a median age of 24 years and 66% are female. Of 26 people with information available, 13 people have been hospitalized, including 1 person who developed Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome. No deaths have been reported. Of 14 people interviewed, 11 (79%) people interviewed reported eating romaine lettuce.
- NJ has 3 cases associated with this outbreak from 3 counties; Bergen (1), Mercer(1) and Union(1). Illness onsets range from October 18, 2018, to October 21, 2018 and ill people range in age from 21 to 70 years and 100% are male, 1 ill person was hospitalized, and no deaths have been reported. Of three people interviewed, two (66%) reported eating romaine lettuce.
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- The current outbreak is not related to a recent multistate outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7 infections linked to romaine lettuce (https://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/2018/o157h7-04-18/index.html).
- The Public Health Agency of Canada has identified 18 ill people infected with the same DNA fingerprint of *E. coli* O157:H7 bacteria in two Canadian provinces: Ontario and Quebec.
- Epidemiologic evidence from the cases in United States and Canada indicates that romaine lettuce is a likely source of the outbreak.
- At this time, no common grower, supplier, distributor, or brand of romaine lettuce has been identified.

Advice to Consumers/Retailers:

- Consumers who have any type of lettuce in their home should discard it even if some of it was eaten and no one got sick
- Consumers should avoid all types or uses of romaine lettuce, such as whole heads of romaine, hearts of romaine, and bags and boxes of precut lettuce and salad mixes that contain romaine, including baby romaine, spring mix, and Caesar salad
- Consumers should throw away any unknown lettuce type or salad from their homes
- Drawers and shelves in refrigerators where lettuce was stored should be washed and sanitized
- Restaurants and retailers should not serve or sell any romaine lettuce, including salads or salad mixes containing romaine.
- Additional guidance on cleaning can be found below; https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/communication/clean-refrigerator-steps.html

Advice to Clinicians:

- Antibiotics are not recommended (https://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/clinicians.html) for patients with *E. coli* O157 infections or for patients in whom *E. coli* O157 infection is suspected, until diagnostic testing rules out this infection.
- 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

This investigation is ongoing and additional updates will be provided as more information becomes available.

Additional Resources:

- IDSA Practice Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Infectious Diarrhea https://academic.oup.com/cid/article/65/12/e45/4557073 2017
- CDC E.Coli Homepage https://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/clinicians.html
- FDA investigation Notice https://www.fda.gov/Food/RecallsOutbreaksEmergencies/Outbreaks/ucm626330.htm