

February 16, 2012

News Release

For Immediate Release

Health Department Plays Key Role in E. Coli Investigation

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced Wednesday that it is collaborating with state and local public health officials in multiple states to investigate an outbreak of E. coli linked to eating raw sprouts. Using DNA “fingerprinting” of the E. coli bacteria and cross-referencing it with a national database, public health officials have confirmed that the bacterium is responsible for infection of 12 people in five states.

Three of those cases were in Missouri, and all three were in Greene County. The Springfield Greene-County Health Department’s epidemiological team worked to identify the common source of the illness on a local level beginning in mid-January, and those efforts contributed to a broader investigation as more cases were identified across the country. Health inspectors from the department’s food division were also involved, following up at restaurant locations by taking samples and looking for any other possible sources of infection.

This type of work is the essential element in identifying the source of such infections and stopping the spread of disease.

“Local public health agencies are often the ‘tip of the spear’ in situations like this,” said Kevin Gipson, Director of Health.

Here are the current highlights of the investigation as outlined by the CDC. The full investigation announcement can be found online at: www.cdc.gov/ecoli/2012/O26-02-12/index.html

- The number of ill persons identified in each state is as follows: Iowa (5), Missouri (3), Kansas (2), Arkansas (1), and Wisconsin (1).
- Two ill persons have been hospitalized, and no deaths have been reported.
- Preliminary results of the epidemiologic and traceback investigations indicate eating raw clover sprouts at Jimmy John’s restaurants is the likely cause of this outbreak.
- FDA’s traceback investigation is ongoing. Traceback information on sprouts has identified a common lot of clover seeds used to grow clover sprouts served at Jimmy John’s restaurant locations where ill persons ate.

None of the three local cases resulted in hospitalizations. The most common symptoms of the bacterium identified in this outbreak include bloody diarrhea, cramping, fever, nausea and chills. The symptoms can be mild or severe, depending on the person’s immune system.

The local investigation began with a confirmed case of E. coli in individuals in mid-January. These reports led to local testing to confirm the cause of the symptoms. At the same time, health department epidemiologists began their investigation – interviewing subjects about their

activities, interactions and meal histories in the preceeding days and weeks in order to spot commonalities that could be clues as to the source of the infection.

“Epidemiology is essentially detective work,” said Kendra Williams, administrator of community health and epidemiology. “Because some time had already passed by the time we spoke with our subjects, it took some digging to find not only the common location, but the common ingredients. Remembering exactly what you ate two weeks ago is not always easy.”

The local infections occurred between Jan. 7 and Jan. 13. At this point, there is no reason to believe there is an ongoing exposure risk at local restaurants.

“Jimmy John’s has been extremely cooperative and has taken all necessary steps to protect food safety at its locations,” said Kevin Gipson, director of health. “They took our investigation seriously and treated it with prompt attention.”

The CDC is also providing the following advice to consumers concerning raw sprouts:

- Children, older adults, pregnant women, and persons with weakened immune systems should avoid eating raw sprouts of any kind (including alfalfa, clover, radish, and mung bean sprouts).
- Cook sprouts thoroughly to reduce the risk of illness. Cooking thoroughly kills the harmful bacteria.
- Request that raw sprouts not be added to your food. If you purchase a sandwich or salad at a restaurant or delicatessen, check to make sure that raw sprouts have not been added.
- Persons who think they might have become ill from eating potentially contaminated sprouts should consult their health care providers.

Further advice from the CDC can be found at:

www.foodsafety.gov/keep/types/fruits/sprouts.html

For more information, contact: Mike Brothers, Public Information Administrator, Springfield-Greene County Health Dept.,(417) 874-1205