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

**Posted:** November 26, 2018  
**Updated from:** 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-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:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National</th>
<th>Case Count</th>
<th>States/Counties</th>
<th>Illness Onset Range</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10/08/18 - 10/31/18</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Key Points:**

- As of November 26, 2018; 43 people infected with the outbreak strain of *E. coli* O157:H7 have been reported from 12 states. Illnesses started on dates from October 8, 2017, to October 31, 2018. Ill people range in age from 1 to 84 years, with a median age of 25 years and 69% are female. Of 38 people with information available, 16 people have been hospitalized, including 1 person who developed Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome, a type of kidney failure. No deaths have been reported. Of 25 people interviewed, 22 (88%) people interviewed reported eating romaine lettuce.
- NJ has 9 cases associated with this outbreak from 6 counties; Bergen (4), Mercer (1), Morris (1), Ocean (1), Sussex (1) and Union (1). Illness onsets range from October 18, 2018, to October 31, 2018, ill people range in age from 1 to 70 years and 77% are female, 3 ill people were
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hospitalized and have been discharged. No deaths have been reported. Of the eight people interviewed, seven (77%) mentioned leafy greens and three (33%) specifically reported eating romaine lettuce.

- 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](https://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/2018/o157h7-04-18/index.html)).
- As of November 23, 2018; the Public Health Agency of Canada has identified 22 ill people infected with the same DNA fingerprint of *E. coli* O157:H7 bacteria in two Canadian provinces: Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick.
- Epidemiologic and traceback evidence from the United States and Canada indicates that romaine lettuce harvested from the Central Coastal growing regions of northern and central California 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:

- Romaine lettuce products will be labeled with a harvest location by region but if not labeled do not buy, serve, sell or eat it. Romaine lettuce labeled with a harvest region outside of the Central Coastal growing regions of northern and central California is not linked to this outbreak.
- Consumers should discard 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 if the harvest area is unknown.
- Restaurants and retailers should not serve or sell any romaine lettuce, including salads or salad mixes containing romaine from the Central Coastal Growing regions of northern and central California.
- Drawers and shelves in refrigerators where lettuce was stored should be washed and sanitized. Additional guidance on cleaning can be found below; [https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/communication/clean-refrigerator-steps.html](https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/communication/clean-refrigerator-steps.html).

### 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/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/index.html) (CDC *E. coli* Homepage)
- [https://www.fda.gov/Food/RecallsOutbreaksEmergencies/Outbreaks/ucm626330.htm](https://www.fda.gov/Food/RecallsOutbreaksEmergencies/Outbreaks/ucm626330.htm) (FDA)
- [https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/foodborne.shtml](https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/foodborne.shtml) (NJDOH Foodborne Illness Homepage)