

Lawmaker wants probe of E. coli and school lunches

November 9 2009, By LIBBY QUAID , AP Education Writer

(AP) -- The chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee wants an investigation into the risk of deadly E. coli getting into school lunches.

Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., is worried about a recent outbreak that killed at least two people and sickened about two dozen others in 11 states.

The E. coli outbreak was linked to ground beef produced by Fairbank Farms of Ashville, N.Y.

No schools were involved in the outbreak. But Miller said he's worried that tainted food might be purchased for school meal programs.

Miller asked the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, to see whether there are adequate protections for school meals at the local, state and federal level. He also asked investigators to compare the safety and quality of ground beef available to schools with the ground beef available to restaurants and other commercial buyers.

The GAO said in a September report that federal authorities had failed to tell schools about recalls of potentially tainted [peanut products](#) and canned vegetables, and cafeterias may have unknowingly served them to children.

A GAO investigation found the [Agriculture](#) Department didn't always make sure states and schools were notified promptly about recalled food distributed through the federal school lunch and breakfast programs, which serve 30 million students.

E. coli is among several kinds of [bacteria](#) that can sicken or kill people. Outbreaks of food poisoning from E. coli often are linked to ground beef, but recent outbreaks also involved prepackaged cookie dough and fresh spinach.

Symptoms of infection from E. coli include severe stomach cramps, diarrhea that is often bloody, and vomiting. Most people get better in a week or so, but some infections can be life-threatening.

Very young children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable, but serious illness from E. coli can also strike healthy older children and young adults.

On the Net:

House Education and Labor Committee: <http://edlabor.house.gov/>

Government Accountability Office: <http://www.gao.gov/>

Background on E. coli: <http://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/>

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Citation: Lawmaker wants probe of E. coli and school lunches (2009, November 9) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-11-lawmaker-probe-coli-school-lunches.html>

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