

E. coli outbreak spreading in Germany

May 27 2011

More than 270 people in Germany have fallen seriously ill because of potentially deadly bacteria, which has been found in imported Spanish cucumbers, officials said Friday.

The Robert Koch Institute, the national disease centre, said more than 60 new cases of haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS) had been reported in the past 24 hours, bringing the total number to 276. Two people have died.

The ministry of consumer affairs said a nationwide special warning had been issued, adding that investigations were underway to track the origin of contaminated vegetables which have been ordered withdrawn from the market.

German authorities have identified organic [cucumbers](#) from Spain as a source of the bacteria, a strain of E. coli, which has also led to food poisoning in Sweden, Denmark, Britain and the Netherlands.

Consumer Affairs Minister Ilse Aigner was to speak by telephone with her Spanish counterpart about the issue later Friday, her spokesman told a regular news conference.

"The European Union internal market has very strong safety rules and we expect all EU states to observe them," he said, adding that, for the present, "one can only speculate about the causes" of the outbreak.

A spokesman for the [health ministry](#) said that the number of infections

was still growing.

In Spain, a spokesman for the AESA food safety agency said investigations were also underway.

"The Andalusian authorities are investigating to find out where the contamination comes from and when it took place," he said.

"This type of bacteria can contaminate at the origin or during handling of the product," he added.

There has been no report of contamination within Spain, AESA said.

Enterohaemorrhagic E. coli causes haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS), which can result in [acute renal failure](#), seizures, strokes and coma.

In the German state of Saarland, near the French border, officials announced they had banned the sale of all cucumbers from Spain.

Some supermarket chains, including the giant Rewe, also said they had withdrawn all Spanish-imported cucumbers from their shelves nationwide.

German officials meanwhile defended themselves against charges, mainly from farmers in northern Germany, that they had acted rashly in their warnings to the public.

Initial warnings had spoken of possible contamination in tomatoes, lettuce, and cucumbers grown in northern Germany, where most cases of food-poisoning have been reported.

"The protection of the consumer must always take precedence over

economic interests," the consumer ministry spokesman said.

German vegetable growers have suffered losses of some two million euros (\$ 2.8 million) per day since the middle of the week, a spokesman for the German Farmers' Association said Friday.

"Trading is completely flat on the vegetable market in Hamburg," Germany's second city, according to Jochen Winkhoff, who heads the Association of German Vegetable Growers.

All growers are hard hit and "we have to destroy their produce because there is no demand," he added.

Denmark's veterinary and food products agency said Friday it had found contaminated cucumbers from Spain in the stocks of two wholesalers in the west of the country and ordered them withdrawn.

It advised consumers not to eat raw cucumbers from Spain or tomatoes and lettuces from northern Germany.

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