

E. coli outbreak spreads, Spain distributors suspended

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More than 270 people in Germany have fallen seriously ill due to potentially deadly bacteria detected in imported Spanish cucumbers, leading Spain to suspend Friday the activities of two distributors.

Dozens more cases have been reported across Europe as experts probe two agricultural sites in the southern Spanish provinces of Almeria and Malaga suspected of exporting products tainted with E. coli, the [European Commission](#) in Brussels said.

"Investigations are ongoing to identify other potential sources, while a third suspect batch of [cucumbers](#) originating either in the Netherlands or in Denmark, and traded in Germany, is also under investigation," the European Union's executive arm said.

The Robert Koch Institute, Germany's 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 in Germany to 276. At least two people have died.

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

According to the Commission, Sweden has reported 25 E. coli cases, with 10 of those people developing HUS, while Denmark has seven E. coli cases (including three HUS) and Britain three cases (two HUS).

The Netherlands had one HUS case and Austria reported two cases of enterohaemorrhagic E. coli, it said.

In Switzerland, authorities said a woman returning from northern Germany also appeared to be infected with the same food-borne bacteria.

Spain's agriculture minister, Rosa Aguilar, had said earlier Friday: "We do not know where the contamination may have taken place and the European Commission has made clear that it could have happened outside the country of origin," the minister said.

"Until now nothing has been proven and it has not been demonstrated that it happened in the country of origin," she said, adding: "Our level of safety and quality is extraordinarily high."

A spokesman for the AESA [food safety](#) agency in Spain said investigations were also under way.

"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."

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

Russia's top health official said a ban on imports of vegetables from Germany was a possible option.

"Because the situation is ongoing and we do not know its causes or the mechanisms by which it is spread, we are examining the option of imposing a ban on German vegetable imports," news agencies quoted

Gennady Onishchenko as saying.

There was no information about when a ban might be imposed, but Russians were instructed to avoid eating German vegetables and those planning to visit the country to only eat prepared food.

The German state of Saarland responded to the outbreak by banning 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.

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 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 lettuce from northern Germany.

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