

Germany holds crisis meeting as killer bacteria spreads

May 30 2011, by Frederic Happe

Germany called crisis talks Monday over warnings that an outbreak of E. coli bacteria poisoning, which is believed to have already left 10 dead, was still spreading.

Some two weeks after the [outbreak](#) was first reported in the north of the country, the number of people contaminated or suspected of having been poisoned by the potentially deadly enterohaemorrhagic E. coli (EHEC) has reached 1,200, according to media reports.

There was no immediate official confirmation of the figure but the Stockholm-based European Centre for [Disease Prevention](#) and Control has described the outbreak as "one of the largest worldwide and the largest ever reported in Germany".

EHEC can result in full-blown haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS), a disease that causes [bloody diarrhoea](#) and serious [liver damage](#) and which can result in death.

Early Monday, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), Germany's national disease institute, reported 329 HUS cases nationwide and three confirmed deaths.

Consumer Affairs Minister Ilse Aigner was to hold an emergency meeting Monday afternoon with Health Minister Daniel Bahr and regional state representatives to discuss the outbreak, her ministry announced.

The outbreak has also affected several other European countries, including Britain, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, though most cases appeared to involve people who had travelled from Germany, the Stockholm centre said.

RKI president Reinhard Burger said Monday the source of the contamination had not yet been clearly identified, but he called on people, especially in northern Germany, to avoid eating raw cucumbers, tomatoes and lettuce.

Authorities had earlier said they had traced some bacteria on organic cucumbers imported from Spain, a measure which led many supermarkets and shops to remove all Spanish-grown vegetables from their shelves.

"At the moment, we can't reliably say what the actual source of contamination is," Burger said.

Jan Galle, director of the Luedenscheid clinic in western Germany, warned that the disease could also be transmitted from person to person.

"We know the EHEC can also be propagated by contact between people," he told ZDF public television Monday.

"Normally we see about 1,000 cases per year, but we've now had some 1,200 cases in just 10 days. And we know that this time the EHEC strain is especially virulent and resistant, and has led to a very high number of HUS" cases, he added.

"We are still going to be losing people," Joerg Debatin, the head of the Eppendorf University Clinic in Hamburg which has seen 76 HUS cases, told Spiegel magazine.

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