

Germany: outbreak waning, but more deaths possible

June 11 2011, By DOROTHEE THIESING , Associated Press



In this June 10, 2011 file photo German Agriculture and Consumer Protection Minister Ilse Aigner, left, and Health Minister Daniel Bahr, right, brief the media about new results in the search for the source of a deadly European E. coli outbreak, at the German parliament Bundestag in Berlin. Germany's health minister says he's hopeful that the worst of an E. coli outbreak that blamed on sprouts is over - but he is warning that the number of deaths, now at 33, may still increase, Bahr was quoted Saturday June 11, 2011 as telling the Bild am Sonntag newspaper. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber, File)

(AP) -- Germany's health minister says he's hopeful that the worst of an E. coli outbreak blamed on sprouts is over - but he is warning that the number of deaths, now at 33, may still increase.

Minister Daniel Bahr's comments came after health officials announced on Friday that they had traced the outbreak to sprouts from a farm in

northern Germany. They also lifted a warning against eating cucumbers, tomatoes and lettuce, which initially had been suspected as possible culprits.

The E. coli outbreak, the world's deadliest, has sickened nearly 3,100 people - most of them in Germany - and prompted many in Europe to shun vegetables over recent weeks.

"The (E. coli) wave is gradually abating - there is reason to hope the worst is now over," Bahr was quoted Saturday as telling the Bild am Sonntag newspaper. He added that a major new flare-up is "very unlikely."

However, "further deaths are not ruled out, as painful as that is," he added.

In Hamburg, one of the areas worst hit by the outbreak, customers at the city's Wandsbek market were back to buying cucumbers, tomatoes and lettuce on Saturday.

With the end of the warning, "now they are coming back to the markets," said farmer Wolfgang Sannmann, who was selling vegetables and fruit. "And the consumer can buy again what he wants and what his [appetite](#) tells him."

Still, some customers remained wary despite officials' assurances that they had pinned down the source.

"I am still very cautious, because in the first place they said it's the cucumbers, and everyone stopped eating them, and now it's the sprouts," said real-estate agent Jessica Hemblen, 27. "I'm not sure whether this is it, or whether it's not going to be something different again."

"It can occur everywhere, and other things can come up too, so I am trying to get a good mixture (of [vegetables](#)) to lower the risk," said retiree Edith Karg.

[Health officials](#) say they tracked the bacteria's path from [hospital patients](#) struggling with [diarrhea](#) and kidney failure, to restaurants where they had dined, to specific meals and ingredients they ate, and finally back to a single farm.

Also on Friday, officials in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia state said tests had found the deadly E. coli strain in a bag of sprouts from the farm that was in the garbage of a family near Cologne, two of whose members had been sickened.

They initially cautioned that the bag had been open for some time and more tests were under way. But Germany's federal risk assessment agency said Saturday that those tests confirmed the strain - adding to the certainty.

There are more questions to answer, including what contaminated the sprouts in the first place - perhaps tainted seeds or water, or nearby animals.

Interviews with thousands of patients, mostly women ages 20 to 50 with healthy lifestyles, led investigators to conclude initially that salads could be the problem. That resulting in the warning to avoid cucumbers, tomatoes and lettuce, which caused major losses for European farmers.

"Of course I have understanding for the companies that have been left sitting on their cucumbers, tomatoes and lettuces," said Bahr, the [health minister](#).

"But I say that protecting health is the priority; if, thanks to the warning,

a single human life was not endangered, that is in everyone's interest."

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Citation: Germany: outbreak waning, but more deaths possible (2011, June 11) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-06-germany-outbreak-waning-deaths.html>

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