

CDC: 1 death, 76 illnesses linked to ground turkey

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(AP) -- Federal officials say one person has died from salmonella poisoning that appears to be linked to eating ground turkey, but the government is still investigating who produced the meat and has not initiated a recall.

Seventy-six people in 26 states have been made sick from the same strain of the disease. The CDC did not say where the person who died became sick and released no details about the death.

The illnesses date back to March, and the CDC said Monday that cultures of ground turkey from four retail locations between March 7 and June 27 showed [salmonella contamination](#), though those are not specifically linked to the illnesses. The agency said preliminary information showed that three of those samples have been linked to the same production establishment but did not name the retailers or the manufacturers.

The Agriculture Department oversees meat safety and would be the agency to announce a recall. The department sent out an alert about the illnesses late last week telling consumers to properly cook their turkey, which can decrease the chances of [salmonella poisoning](#). But the department has not given consumers any further warnings about the source of the tainted meat.

USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service "has not linked these

illnesses to a particular brand, product, or establishment, and therefore has not issued a recall," spokesman Brian Mabry said Tuesday. "We are continuing to investigate this situation."

The CDC said it and USDA were "vigorously working to identify the specific contaminated product or products that are causing illnesses and will update the public on the progress of this investigation as information becomes available."

Food safety advocate Bill Marler, an attorney who has represented victims of the nation's biggest food-borne illness outbreaks, said he believes the three positive samples should prompt a recall.

"Consumers have no idea what to do except not eat ground turkey," he said.

The illnesses are spread all over the country. The states with the highest number sickened were Michigan and Ohio, 10 illnesses each, while nine illnesses were reported in Texas. Illinois had seven, California six and Pennsylvania five.

The remaining states have between one and three reported illnesses linked to the outbreak, according to the CDC: Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Iowa, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee and Wisconsin.

A chart on the CDC's website shows cases have occurred every month since early March, with spikes in May and early June. The latest reported cases were in mid-July, although the CDC said some recent cases may not have been reported yet.

University of Pennsylvania bioethicist Art Caplan said the government's

handling of the outbreak raises ethical questions about why the public wasn't warned sooner.

"You've got to protect the public health. That's their first and primary value - not industry, not any other goal. They have to warn as quickly as they think there's reasonable evidence for concern," Caplan said.

He said that uncertainty about the outbreak's source might explain the long silence, but added, "the moral duty is to really get the word out as soon as you have evidence of a problem."

CDC spokeswoman Lola Russell said Tuesday it can take three to four weeks to confirm one case. Identifying an outbreak can take considerably longer than that when cases of foodborne illness occur sporadically, in several states, as has happened in the current outbreak, she said.

Russell said the CDC isn't advising the public to avoid eating ground turkey, but does urge people to cook it properly.

Ground turkey is considered safe to eat when the internal temperature reaches 165 degrees. For turkey patties or burgers, internal temperatures on each side should be measured.

Other government advice:

- Refrigerate raw meat and poultry within two hours after purchase, one hour if temperatures in the house exceed 90 F.

- Refrigerate cooked meat and poultry within two hours after cooking.

- Wash hands with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling raw meat and poultry.

The CDC estimates that 50 million Americans each year get sick from food poisoning, including about 3,000 who die. Salmonella causes most of these cases and federal health officials say they've made virtually no progress against it.

The most common symptoms of salmonella are diarrhea, abdominal cramps and fever within eight hours to 72 hours of eating a contaminated product. It is life-threatening to some with weakened immune systems.

Salmonella infections may last about a week and often don't require treatment other than drinking plenty of water and other fluids. Sometimes antibiotics are used when the infection spreads from the intestines. The CDC says some salmonella bacteria have become drug-resistant because of antibiotics used to promote livestock growth.

One of the largest outbreaks last year involved salmonella-tainted eggs that may have sickened as many as 56,000. About 2,000 illnesses were reported, but CDC estimates that only a fraction of illnesses are reported in most outbreaks.

In April, Jennie-O Turkey Store, a division of Hormel, recalled almost 55,000 pounds of frozen, raw turkey burger products linked to an outbreak of a different strain of salmonella. The CDC said then that 12 people were sickened in 10 states.

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