

Q&A: Key answers about listeria in fruit

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Cantaloupes rot in the afternoon heat on a field on the Jensen Farms near Holly, Colo., on Wednesday, Sept. 28, 2011. The Food and Drug Administration has recalled 300,000 cases of cantaloupe grown on the Jensen Farms after connecting it with a listeria outbreak. Officials said Wednesday more illnesses and possibly more deaths may be linked to the outbreak of listeria in coming weeks. (AP Photo/Ed Andrieski)

(AP) -- Some questions consumers may have about [listeria in cantaloupes](#).

Q: What is listeria?

A: Listeria is a hardy bacteria found in soil and water that can be carried by animals. It is often found in processed meats because it can contaminate a processing facility and stay there for a long period of time. It is also common in unpasteurized cheeses and unpasteurized

milk. It is less common in produce like cantaloupe, but there have been a couple of other listeria outbreaks in [fruits and vegetables](#) in recent years. When a person contracts the disease, it can cause fever, muscle aches, [gastrointestinal symptoms](#) and even death. One in five people who have listeria can die.

Q: Am I at risk?

A: Listeria generally only affects the elderly, people with compromised immune systems, [pregnant women](#) and [newborns](#) whose mothers were infected before birth. The [median age](#) of victims in this outbreak is 78 years old. Healthy, younger adults and most children can usually consume listeria with no ill effects or mild illness.

Q: So can I eat cantaloupe?

A: You should avoid cantaloupe from Jensen Farms, the Colorado grower that distributed the tainted fruit.

Q: How do I know if I have a cantaloupe from Jensen Farms?

A: The recalled cantaloupe may be labeled "Colorado Grown," "Distributed by Frontera Produce," "Jensenfarms.com" or "Sweet Rocky Fords." It may also be labeled "USA." Not all of the recalled cantaloupes are labeled with a sticker, the [Food and Drug Administration](#) said, so it may be hard to tell. Neither the government nor Jensen Farms has released a list of retailers who sold the fruit, so [health officials](#) advise consumers ask retailers about the origin of their cantaloupe.

Q: I think I may have had one of the contaminated cantaloupes in my home. But I'm not sure. What should I do?

A: The government's motto is "when in doubt, throw it out." And if you

think you had tainted fruit in your home, clean and sanitize all surfaces it may have touched.

Q: I scrub all of my fruits and vegetables before I eat them. So I am okay, right?

A: Scrubbing is never a bad idea, but it may not rid produce of all contaminants, especially on cantaloupe which has a thick, rough skin with a lot of places for pathogens to hide. Health officials think people may have been sickened when people cut into their cantaloupes, bringing listeria on the outside of the fruit to the inside. If you think you may have a tainted cantaloupe in your house, the best recourse is to throw it out.

Q: It looks like the cantaloupes weren't even shipped to my state. Should I still be concerned?

A: The FDA said Jensen Farms shipped to 25 states, but it may have been resold in other states. Illnesses have been discovered in several states where cantaloupes weren't shipped, including in Maryland where a person died.

Q: Why have there been so many deaths?

A: Listeria is less well-known than other pathogens like salmonella and E. coli, which cause many more illnesses in tainted food every year. But listeria is more deadly. One in five people who contract it can die.

Q: When is this outbreak going to be over?

A: FDA and CDC officials said Wednesday that they expect the number of illnesses and even deaths to rise through October. [Listeria](#) has an incubation period of a month or more, so people who ate contaminated

fruit last week may not see illnesses until next month.

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