

US meningitis death toll rises to 29: official

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Some 29 people have died from fungal meningitis they contracted after being treated with tainted steroid injections blamed for a growing national outbreak, US health officials said Wednesday.

The number of cases tied to the tainted drugs have climbed to 377 in 19 states, including nine joint infections, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Some 14,000 people in 23 states are at risk after having received potentially tainted doses of the steroid from the New England Compounding Center.

The injections are typically put into the spine to treat back pain.

Authorities are investigating the NECC, saying its now defunct facility outside Boston made medications in unsanitary conditions with bacteria and mold so prevalent it could be seen with the naked eye.

Officials have said that due to the disease's long incubation period, it could be weeks before authorities have a final tally of the infections from the unprecedented outbreak.

Michigan is now the hardest hit state with 101 cases and seven deaths, followed by the southern state of Tennessee with 74 cases and 11 fatalities.

Other states hit badly include Florida, Indiana, Maryland, New Jersey

and Virginia.

The outbreak has led to calls for tighter regulation of the loosely controlled pharmaceutical compounding industry. Federal investigators have launched a criminal probe into the case.

Critics say drug manufacturers have found a way to sidestep costly and strict oversight by classifying themselves as pharmacies, which are given freer rein to mix drug compounds for patients.

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