

Health officials say ice cream is safe despite some recalls

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A Blue Bell Ice Cream truck stops at Walgreens in Dallas on Thursday morning, April 23, 2015. Texas-based Blue Bell Creameries recalled all its products this week after listeria was found in a variety of the company's frozen treats. New technologies account for one way that the government is tracking a life-threatening outbreak of listeria linked to Blue Bell ice cream products. Listeria is a hearty bacteria found in soil and water that can be tracked into a plant or carried by animals. (David Woo/The Dallas Morning News via AP)

Federal health officials say ice cream is still safe to eat—even amid recalls by two ice cream companies after the discovery of listeria bacteria in their frozen confections.

The Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say there's no reason to think that listeria illnesses and deaths linked to Texas-based Blue Bell Creameries and the discovery of listeria in Ohio-based Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams are related.

"Based upon what we know now, there is no connection between these two ice cream companies nor any reason to suspect that ice cream as a whole poses any special foodborne disease risk," said CDC's Dr. Robert Tauxe.

Blue Bell, which recalled all of its products Monday, is linked to 10 illnesses, including three deaths, in four states. Jeni's ice cream hasn't been linked to any illnesses, but the company recalled its products Thursday after Nebraska health officials found listeria in a sample of ice cream.

On Friday, Jeni's said early testing suggested that listeria was present in other pints from the same batch the Nebraska officials tested, and possibly another batch as well. The company said additional testing appeared to show that listeria was present in Jeni's manufacturing plant in Columbus.

"We are encouraged that the early indications suggest we have found it and can focus on eradicating it," said John Lowe, Jeni's CEO, in a statement on the company's website.

Tauxe said the discovery of listeria is a "wake-up call" for the industry, since the bacteria isn't very common in ice cream. While the hardy bacteria thrive in cooler environments, they can't grow at freezing

temperatures.

At least one other major ice cream manufacturer, Unilever, appeared confident, saying in a statement that the company has "robust quality and safety protocols across our ice cream network designed to prevent listeria contamination." Unilever owns Ben & Jerry's, Breyer's and other ice cream brands.

In a statement, the International Dairy Foods Association said the dairy industry is "seeking to understand how and why" listeria ended up in the products.

"Ice cream makers are double and triple checking safety protocols to make sure you can shop with confidence when buying ice cream," the industry group said.

The FDA agreed consumers should feel safe eating anything that hasn't been recalled.

"Despite these recalls, it is important to understand that ice cream in the United States is generally safe," said the FDA's Jeff Ventura. "These recalls are an example of companies taking appropriate action by getting potentially unsafe foods off the market."

The FDA is investigating the Blue Bell outbreak but hasn't said what caused it. On Thursday, Blue Bell said its plants in Texas, Oklahoma and Alabama are undergoing intensive cleaning.

Listeria illnesses generally only affect the elderly, people with compromised immune systems and pregnant women. The three people who died consumed the Blue Bell product in a Kansas hospital.

The bacteria is found in soil and water, and it can be tracked into a

manufacturing facility, carried by animals or spread by employees not using proper sanitation practices.

Bill Yarbrough of New Albany, Ohio, said he understands why the recalls are concerning to those most at risk but he's not going to stop buying ice cream. Expecting the company would take a hit, Yarbrough started recruiting fellow fans on Facebook to help Jeni's rebound.

"When a company makes a good decision like this, but it's going to cost them a lot of money, they need to know and be rewarded for that," he said.

Sandra Eskin, director of food safety for the Pew Charitable Trusts, says she believes the U.S. ice cream supply is safe but that the outbreak linked to Blue Bell shows the need for more testing for foodborne bacteria in manufacturing facilities. President Barack Obama signed a sweeping new food safety law in 2011 that would boost some of that testing, but the FDA hasn't yet put all of the rules in place.

"It's frustrating that people have to get sick while we wait for the process to play out," Eskin said.

At the same time, the recalls may be evidence that testing has increased.

The Nebraska Department of Agriculture's discovery of listeria in Jeni's ice cream was part of a program to test ready-to-eat products for foodborne illness. South Carolina health officials were the first to discover listeria in Blue Bell products as part of a random sampling program that includes frozen desserts. Following the recalls, the Ohio Department of Agriculture said it would add ice cream to the list of items they pull from store shelves to check for contamination.

Former FDA assistant commissioner David Acheson, now a consultant

to food manufacturers, says ice cream companies will boost listeria testing as a result of the recalls.

"We just have to cross our fingers there won't be a whole lot more recalls," Acheson said. "When you start to look, you find."

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