

Number of people sickened in listeria case grows

April 9 2015

The number of people sickened by a foodborne illness linked to some Blue Bell ice cream products has grown to include three others in Texas, according to federal health authorities.

Dr. Brendan Jackson, a medical epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said tests confirmed that three people in Texas have a similar strain of listeria previously found in five others at a hospital in Wichita, Kansas.

Three of the five in Kansas have died and health officials there say listeriosis, also known as listeria, might have been a contributing factor in the deaths.

The three in Texas also were hospitalized at some point from 2011 to 2014 for unrelated problems when they developed listeria, the CDC said in a statement. They apparently became ill when they ate Blue Bell ice cream produced at the company's plant in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma.

The manufacturing plant, one of four operated by the company, has been temporarily closed.

Preliminary tests indicate another three people hospitalized at some point from 2010 to 2012 appear to have a similar strain of listeria as the others, according to the CDC, but further testing is necessary before confirming a connection. Jackson said one of those patients was hospitalized in Texas while the other two were admitted elsewhere.

"We're continuing to monitor for additional cases and ensuring we're taking all actions needed to protect public health," he said.

Blue Bell Creameries on Tuesday announced a third product recall as a result of the contamination. The company, based in Brenham, Texas, has recalled more than 25 of its products since last month.

"Our prayers and sympathies are with the families who have lost loved ones or who have suffered illnesses that may have been complicated by listeriosis," the company said in a statement Thursday. "The fact that our products may be linked to these events is very distressing to us. We are sorry for this news and we are doing everything possible to determine the cause of the outbreak."

Company officials said they're working with federal health inspectors to resolve the matter.

Listeria is a life-threatening infection caused by eating food contaminated with bacteria called *Listeria monocytogenes*, the CDC said. The disease primarily affects pregnant women and their newborns, older adults, and people with immune systems weakened by cancer, cancer treatments, or other serious conditions.

The Texas Rangers baseball club said Wednesday that they won't offer Blue Bell at their upcoming homestand against the Houston Astros. The Astros previously said Blue Bell wouldn't be offered on their opening day earlier this week. Large retailers such as Wal-Mart have in recent weeks either pulled the items included in the recalls or removed all Blue Bell products from their shelves.

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