

E. coli in Northwest marks Chipotle's 3rd outbreak this year

November 2 2015, by Donna Gordon Blankinship



A pedestrian walks past a closed Chipotle restaurant in Portland, Ore., Monday, Nov. 2, 2015. Chipotle voluntarily closed down 43 of its locations in Washington and in the Portland area as a precaution after an E. coli outbreak linked to six of its restaurants in the two states has sickened nearly two dozen people. (AP Photo/Don Ryan)

Chipotle closed 43 of its Pacific Northwest locations after the chain's third foodborne illness this year sickened about two dozen

people—prompting renewed scrutiny of a company that touts its use of fresh ingredients and farm-sourced fare.

Cases of the bacterial illness were traced to six of the casual Mexican food restaurants, but the company voluntarily closed down all of its locations in Washington and the Portland, Oregon, area as a precaution as an investigation continues.

Three people in the Portland area and 19 people in western Washington have gotten sick with E. coli as of Friday. Seventeen of them had eaten at a Chipotle restaurant during the past few weeks. Eight people have been hospitalized but no deaths have been reported.

Chipotle has faced other recent foodborne outbreaks. A salmonella outbreak linked to tomatoes sickened dozens of people in Minnesota beginning in August, according to state health officials. In California, health workers said norovirus sickened nearly 100 customers and employees at a Chipotle restaurant in Simi Valley in mid-August.

"Having three problems in a couple of months means that Chipotle is not paying attention to food safety like it should," said Bill Marler, a Seattle food safety lawyer who built his national reputation with the 1993 E. coli outbreak at Seattle Jack in the Box restaurants.

The common denominator in most food-borne illness outbreaks is poor food safety, Marler said.

People should not assume a company that focuses on local and fresh ingredients—like Chipotle—is going to be immune from food safety issues, he said.

"People shouldn't have a false sense of security that local means safer," Marler said.

Health officials believe the contamination at Chipotle is related to a fresh food product such as lettuce or other produce.



A sign posted on the door of a Chipotle restaurant in Portland, Ore. reads "temporarily closed due to a supply chain issue," on Monday, Nov. 2, 2015. An E. coli outbreak linked to Chipotle restaurants in Washington state and Oregon has sickened nearly two dozen people in the third outbreak of food borne illness at the popular chain this year. (AP Photo/Don Ryan)

The outbreak probably will not be traced to one sick individual or one instance of cross-contamination of food because the cases are connected with various restaurants, said Marisa D'Angeli, medical epidemiologist with the Washington State Department of Health.

The company is not planning to close any other restaurants in other states

because there is no evidence of a link to other locations, company spokesman Chris Arnold said.

Only six restaurants in Washington and Oregon have been connected to the outbreak.

"We closed 43 in those states out of an abundance of caution," Arnold said.

Reopening the shuttered locations will depend on the investigation, he said.

Adam Adamson of New York marketing consulting firm BrandSimple said the outbreak in Washington state is likely to hurt the brand far beyond the closed stores.

"Many consumers will feel, 'Why risk it?,' until they find out how it happened," Adamson said. "Consumers have lots of choices."



A sign posted on the door of a Chipotle restaurant in Portland, Ore. reads that the location is "temporarily closed due to a supply chain issue," on Monday, Nov. 2, 2015. An E. coli outbreak linked to Chipotle restaurants in Washington state and Oregon has sickened nearly two dozen people in the third outbreak of food borne illness at the popular chain this year. (AP Photo/Don Ryan)

Although the shutdown restaurants represent just 2 percent of the company's 1,931 locations, each restaurant brings in about \$2.5 million in revenue a year on average, according to Chipotle.

Chipotle's stock fell as much as 5 percent early Monday, but recovered slightly, falling 2.5 percent to close at \$624.

The decision to close down immediately will help the brand in the long-term, said Laura Ries, president of Atlanta marketing strategy firm Ries & Ries. "They went above and beyond what they needed to do," she said.

Customers tend to return to eating foods that caused illnesses as soon as they are assured it's safe, said Darren Seifer, a food analyst at market research firm NPD Group.

Chipotle's stock fell as much as 5 percent early Monday, but recovered slightly, and was down about 3 percent by Monday afternoon.

Outside a closed Chipotle near the University of Washington in Seattle, Trey Reche stopped by to read the signs on the door.

"I think Chipotle has too much of a strong fan base to go completely under by this," said Reche, who last ate at Chipotle a few weeks ago. "It might be a huge wakeup call for them to rethink how they're getting their food."

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Citation: E. coli in Northwest marks Chipotle's 3rd outbreak this year (2015, November 2)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-11-coli-northwest-chipotle-3rd-outbreak.html>

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