

Outside Chipotle outbreak, foodborne illness a wider problem

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Electron micrograph image of a cluster of *E. coli* bacteria magnified 10,000 times. Researchers were able to quickly sequence the DNA of a suspected strain of *E. coli* thought to be the case of the latest outbreak in Europe. Credit: Eric Erbe | Christopher Pooley | USDA | ARS | EMU

Chipotle is preparing to reopen its restaurants in the Pacific Northwest after an *E. coli* outbreak sickened about 45 people, a high-profile example of foodborne illnesses that are more common than the public realizes, health experts say.

Forty-three outposts of the Mexican food chain in Washington state and the Portland, Oregon, area have been closed since the end of October because of the outbreak that hospitalized more than a dozen people.

That's a tiny fraction of about 48 million cases of foodborne disease that occur in the U.S. each year, sending about 105,000 people to the hospital and resulting in 2,000 deaths, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's about one in seven people in the country getting sick from food every year.

Many of the illnesses involve people eating at home, but restaurant-related outbreaks are fairly common, said Dr. Paul Cieslak, medical director for communicable diseases at Oregon's state health agency.

"Screw-ups can occur in any kitchen, but obviously it's more dramatic when it occurs in a kitchen that serves 5,000 people," said Cieslak, who has helped investigate the E. coli outbreak linked to Chipotle.

There are things people can do to ward off foodborne illnesses: Wash your hands before making or eating food, avoid undercooked hamburger or raw shellfish, be careful about cross-contamination of raw meat, wash produce thoroughly, and steer clear of unpasteurized milk or juice.

But it's impossible to avoid all bacteria on food, Cieslak said. For example, if lettuce or berries are contaminated with E. coli, it's very difficult to wash them well enough to get to every nook and cranny where the bacteria are hiding.

"When you go to a restaurant, let's face it—you're kind of at the mercy of what's going on in the kitchen," he said.

Most reports of potential food-related illnesses pose no continuing risk to the public, so local health departments do not publicize them, according to Dr. Jeff Duchin, health officer for Seattle and King County Public Health.

Of the more than 1,000 potential cases each year in the county that

includes Seattle, only a handful are confirmed as food-related outbreaks. When confirmed cases pose an ongoing risk, an announcement is made.

Duchin said that's why the most recent Chipotle-related outbreak attracted widespread attention, while a smaller case—five people sick from eating at one Seattle Chipotle restaurant in July—was not reported.

The July outbreak had ended by the time the health department investigated, and officials found no evidence of an ongoing problem, said Duchin, who noted that the two cases involved different *E. coli* strains.

A Seattle attorney who specializes in food-safety cases was upset when he heard about the earlier illnesses.

"It just drives me nuts," said Bill Marler, who built his national reputation with the 1993 *E. coli* outbreak at Seattle Jack in the Box restaurants. "This is the kind of thing that tears apart people's belief that government can actually do stuff correctly and good."

Government regulations and restaurant and farm inspections prevent some people from getting sick, but critics say more must be done.

Better testing on farms and in warehouses is one hope of Jaydee Hanson, a senior policy analyst at the Center for Food Safety, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that promotes food safety and sustainable agriculture.

Good government regulations and inspections help prevent some illnesses, as do responsible farmers, restaurants and grocery stores, Hanson said. Public pressure will improve the nation's food system, and so will lawyers, he added.

"I have no doubt in mind that the civil justice system does change behavior," said Ryan Osterholm, a lawyer for Pirtzer Olsen in Minneapolis, which has sued Chipotle in the current case and in a previous case in Minnesota.

Osterholm said lawsuits will force the company to answer questions such as whether it visited the farms where its produce was grown and if it gets outside help with food quality and safety.

Chipotle has announced several new efforts to improve food safety, including testing fresh produce, raw meat and dairy items before they arrive in restaurants.

"We have also retained two of the nation's best food-safety scientists to work with us to assess practices and find additional areas for improvement," Chipotle spokesman Chris Arnold said. "We are leaving no stone unturned in terms of finding ways to improve upon our practices."

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