

Boston College: 80 sickened after eating at Chipotle

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A man walks near a closed Chipotle restaurant on Monday, Dec. 7, 2015, in the Cleveland Circle neighborhood of Boston. Chipotle said late Monday that it closed the restaurant after several students at Boston College, including members of the men's basketball team, reported "gastrointestinal symptoms" after eating at the chain. The school said it was working with local health officials to determine the cause of the illness. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Boston College said Tuesday the number of students complaining of

gastrointestinal symptoms after eating at a Chipotle this weekend has climbed to 80, up from the 30 it reported the previous day.

The illnesses prompted the temporary closure of a Chipotle restaurant in Boston where the students ate, and come as the chain's sales are already being slammed by a multistate outbreak of E. coli linked to its restaurants.

Chipotle says it thinks the Boston College illnesses are an isolated case of norovirus and unrelated to the E. coli cases that have turned up in nine states.

"All of the evidence we have points in that direction," said Chris Arnold, a Chipotle spokesman.

Boston College said it is working with state health officials and that all students who reported symptoms have been tested for both E. Coli and norovirus. It said results will not be available for at least two days.

According to a report from the Boston Inspectional Services department, which is responsible for inspecting the city's restaurants, an employee at the Chipotle restaurant in Cleveland Circle was sick while working a shift Thursday.

William Christopher, the department's commissioner, said it was not immediately known if management at Chipotle was aware of the employee's symptoms. He said the restaurant's permit to operate has been suspended by the city and that a disinfection process has begun.



People stand inside a closed Chipotle restaurant on Monday, Dec. 7, 2015, in the Cleveland Circle neighborhood of Boston. Chipotle said late Monday that it closed the restaurant after several students at Boston College, including members of the men's basketball team, reported "gastrointestinal symptoms" after eating at the chain. The school said it was working with local health officials to determine the cause of the illness. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, infected workers cause about 70 percent of reported norovirus outbreaks from contaminated food. Each year, norovirus causes 19 million to 21 million illnesses.

The virus can spread from an infected person, contaminated food or water, or by touching contaminated surfaces, the agency says. It is very contagious and can spread quickly in places such as daycare centers and cruise ships.

Common symptoms include diarrhea, vomiting, nausea and stomach pain.

If tests confirm that the Boston illnesses are the result of norovirus, it would support Chipotle's previous statement that whatever ingredient that was likely to blame for the E. coli is out of its restaurants by now.

The CDC has not yet determined the ingredient responsible for sickening 52 people in the E. coli outbreak, but 47 of the individuals reported eating at a Chipotle before they got ill. The first cases were reported at the end of October in Oregon and Washington, with additional cases being reported later.

The most recent illness started Nov. 13, according to the CDC.

At a presentation Tuesday for analysts in New York City, Chipotle executives noted the exposure period for the E. coli cases appears to be over. The company has said it is tightening its food safety procedures, and that some of its local produce suppliers might not be able to meet the new standards.

Executives said the chain may eventually raise prices to make up for its food safety investments.

In its annual report, Chipotle has noted it may be at a higher risk for outbreaks of food-borne illnesses because of its "fresh produce and meats rather than frozen, and our reliance on employees cooking with traditional methods rather than automation."

Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc., based in Denver, has more than 1,900 locations, primarily in the U.S. The company has already warned that sales are expected to fall as much as 11 percent at established locations for the fourth quarter as a result of bad publicity from the E. coli cases.

That would mark the first time the sales figure has declined since Chipotle went public in 2006.

Chipotle shares closed down 1.7 percent at \$542.24 Tuesday.

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