

Lactalis salmonella contamination 'may go back a decade'

February 1 2018



Lactalis has been engulfed in scandal since authorities ordered a massive international recall of the baby milk which made at least 38 babies ill in France and Spain

Researchers raised fears Thursday that salmonella-tainted milk produced by French dairy giant Lactalis, which sickened dozens of babies, could

have infected others over more than a decade.

Lactalis has been engulfed in scandal since December when authorities ordered a massive international recall of the baby milk which made at least 38 babies ill in France and Spain.

The Pasteur research institute said Thursday that the exact same strain of salmonella sickened at least 25 others between 2006 and 2016—and that the same Lactalis factory in northwest France was the likely origin.

Lactalis has been the target of heavy criticism after it emerged that the company's own tests found salmonella at the factory in Craon, but it did not sound the alarm because it had not detected the bacteria in the milk itself.

That raised fears that contaminations may have occurred well before last year's discovery but gone undetected, with critics pointing to an outbreak at the same production site that sickened 146 children in 2005—before it was bought by Lactalis a year later.

"First we confirmed that the same type of Salmonella agona was behind the two outbreaks, in 2005 and 2017," Pasteur Institute director Francois-Xavier Weill told AFP.

"So we asked ourselves where the strain could have been during the 12 years in between" those two scares, he said.

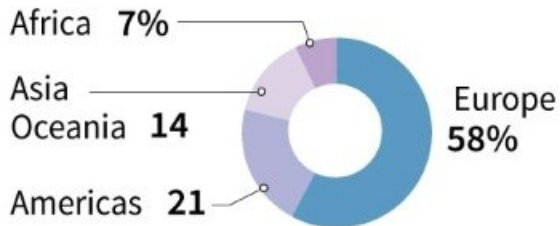
"The only possible hypothesis is that it remained at the factory in question."

Although the institute could not definitively determine whether the sickened babies drank Lactalis milk, "the DNA evidence is very clear, and it points to this factory," Weill said.

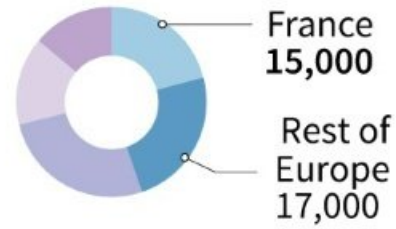
France's dairy giant Lactalis

246 production sites in 47 countries

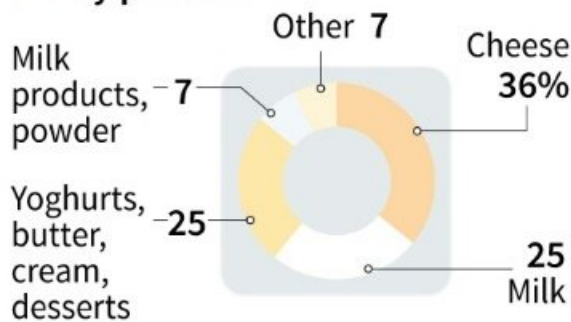
► Turnover
17.3 billion euros



► Employees
75,000 in 85 countries



► By product



► Dairy producers for Lactalis in France



Source: Lactalis

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Lactalis CEO Emmanuel Besnier confirmed Thursday that tests between the two outbreaks had found the same salmonella at the factory, though not in the milk.

"We can't exclude the possibility that some babies drank contaminated milk during this period," he admitted.

The bacteria was found in a dehydration tower used to reduce milk, which Lactalis now plans to shut down for good, Besnier told newspaper Les Echos.

Lawsuits

The company is facing several lawsuits over the outbreak, and police raided the group's headquarters in Laval, western France, earlier this month.

It recalled 12 million packages of the affected baby milk, under brands including Picot, Milumel and Celia, across 83 countries.

Several retailers later admitted that they had continued to sell the products even after the recall was announced.

Investigators have opened a preliminary inquiry for suspected fraud as well as endangering health by failing to properly execute the recall.

Salmonella causes fever and diarrhoea in infants, along with vomiting in some cases, which can lead to babies being hospitalised for dehydration.

According to French health authorities, all of the babies sickened by salmonella-tainted milk made a good recovery.

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