

French company charged over baby milk salmonella scandal

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Lactalis was charged after five years and hundreds of lawsuits.

French food company Lactalis said Thursday it had been charged over a five-year-old global scandal in which dozens of babies fell sick from salmonella-contaminated powdered formula milk.

Prosecutors brought the [criminal charges](#), also targeting the group's Celia Laiterie de Craon factory, for serious fraud, involuntarily bodily harm and a failure to carry out a recall order for the tainted [milk](#), it said.

Lactalis, one of the world's biggest dairy groups, said it was cooperating with the investigation.

Several babies were diagnosed with salmonella poisoning at the end of 2017 in France after being given [milk products](#), mostly Lactalis-owned Milumel and Picot brands, delivered by the Craon factory, in the northwest.

In France alone, 36 babies showed salmonella symptoms within three days of being given Lactalis products.

Spain and Greece also reported cases, with Lactalis admitting at the time that its powdered milk in more than 80 other countries was affected.

Salmonella poisoning symptoms can range from relatively benign gastroenteritis, to serious disease in very young children, [old people](#) and patients with weakened immunity.

Prosecutors accuse Lactalis of failing to promptly carry out a recall to limit the damage, and said they had identified several problems in its production chain leading to the contamination in the first place.

Lactalis in mid-January 2018 pulled all [powdered milk](#) produced by Craon from the shelves, more than 12 million packages.

The company and its reclusive chief executive, billionaire Emmanuel Besnier, were harshly criticized for failing to address the problem publicly for weeks.

In 2018, Lactalis still claimed the contamination had been caused by work done at the factory in the first half of 2017.

But France's leading bacteriology body, the Institut Pasteur, found the bacteria had been present in the site's production since 2005.

Several hundred people filed lawsuits against Lactalis, mostly for fraud, and investigators took dozens of witness statements.

Thursday's charges were "proof of the existence of serious and confirmed evidence in this case", Jade Dousselin, a lawyer for a consumer association of claimants in the case, told AFP.

She said the move was "the first step towards a conviction of those responsible for this big health scandal".

A spokeswoman for NGO Foodwatch, Ingrid Kragl, said she hoped for "exemplary sanctions" that would end what she called a "climate of impunity" for food companies.

A 2022 study of the case submitted to investigators and seen by AFP found Lactalis had shown a "lack of vigilance, or even blindness" concerning repeated signs that its production had become unsafe.

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