

Children in Utah develop E. coli illness from playing around lawn sprinklers

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Happily jumping around lawn sprinklers or playing with garden hoses on

a hot summer day: An idyllic childhood scene.

Not so for a bunch of kids in Utah, who all got serious E. coli illnesses from the contaminated water they were exposed to.

In total, 13 kids averaging just 4 years of age were infected during late July of last year in an unidentified Utah city, according to a report led by BreAnne Osborn of the Utah Department of Health and Human Services.

The findings were [reported](#) May 9 in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

In seven of the 13 cases, E. coli illness was so severe that children needed to be hospitalized. Two of those kids developed a life-threatening kidney condition that's sometimes linked to E. coli, called hemolytic uremic syndrome.

Luckily, all of the children eventually recovered.

Parents may not realize that bacteria like E. coli can lurk in sprinkler water, but "municipal irrigation water systems are underrecognized possible sources of waterborne illnesses," Osborn's team said.

The Utah outbreak began when six kids came down with E. coli between July 22 and 30, 2023, and those cases expanded to 13 upon further investigation in the local area. The last case of E. coli connected to this outbreak emerged a month later, on Aug. 31, the report's authors said.

Questionnaires circulated among parents found that 12 of the 13 ill children reported being exposed to water meant for lawns and gardens (not tap water) during the week before symptom onset.

This included "playing with hose water (five), inflatable lawn water toys (three), and water tables (two); drinking (two); and running through sprinklers (one)," the researchers said.

Public health announcements regarding the dangers eventually helped bring an end to the outbreak.

People may not realize it, but in many municipalities across the United States, the hygiene standards for tap water are much stricter than those meant for landscape irrigation.

In Utah, for example, irrigation water "systems are not intended for drinking or recreation, [and] are not monitored or tested for water quality," Osborn's team said.

E.coli can get into water reservoirs via feces, and "avian, ruminant [ie., deer, cattle], and human fecal markers were detected" in water samples conducted after the outbreak. Because of this, "educating residents of communities with these irrigation systems about the risks of playing in or drinking untreated water" is crucial to preventing illness outbreaks, they said.

More information: BreAnne Osborn et al, Shiga Toxin–Producing *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 Illness Outbreak Associated with Untreated, Pressurized, Municipal Irrigation Water — Utah, 2023, *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (2024). DOI: 10.15585/mmwr.mm7318a1

Find out more about E. coli at the [Mayo Clinic](#).

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