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***Restaurants, markets pull green onions in E. coli scare***

By Harris Totter || October 15, 2007  
*The Cleveland Dispatch*

As Ohio health officials confirmed the state's tenth and eleventh case related to a multistate outbreak of E. coli O157:H7, supermarkets and restaurants throughout the state scrambled to pull green onions off their shelves and menus.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned consumers nationwide over the weekend to avoid green onions until the source of the contamination has been identified and it can be confirmed that the danger is over. There have been reports that the contaminated onions are from Mexico, but there have been no confirmed tests, and FDA has only cleared those grown in certain states, including Ohio.

FDA officials said they are aggressively trying to track down the source of the outbreak caused by the dangerous strain of the bacteria E. coli. "We are working on around the clock," said Jim Jameson, the FDA's district director for Ohio. "We're looking at the science and the epidemiology, and that will govern where we go next. Right now, you know what we know."

Although Ohio-grown green onions were cleared by FDA, local stores aren't taking any chances. "Our customers can't be expected to read the fine print," said Thomas Jeffers, the regional produce manager for SuperSavers markets, "they just know the product is dangerous, and we want them to know that we're being proactive."

"Holy moley! I had no idea," said shopper Larry Ace when we approached him shopping in the produce section of the SuperSavers on St. Clair Avenue in Glenville when we told him of the E. coli threat. "I was going to buy some onions today to make some chip dip!"

Following recent outbreaks of E. coli in spinach and salmonella in tomatoes, consumers are increasingly wary of fresh produce and worried about food safety in general. Recent surveys show declining confidence in food safety and of the government's job in ensuring safe food.

Ohio farmers are outraged because they can't get anyone to buy their product. The Ohio Department of Agriculture has issued a press release announcing the safety of Ohio green onions, and the department's Director, Peter Wheatstraw, has been critical of FDA's handling of the situation. "Our farm economy is being destroyed by this. Our farmers can't afford it. Something is wrong when one guy in the middle of who-knows-where can do something stupid and manage to shut down the entire industry."

The outbreak was initially thought to be caused by iceberg lettuce used by national chain Jalapeños Tex Mex and northeast chain Taco Taco, which both pulled it from their menus after preliminary tests by Jalapeños indicated that it was contaminated. The two restaurants are at the center the outbreak that began in upstate New York but which quickly spread to neighboring states before blossoming into a nationwide emergency that has sickened 126 people in 14 states, including 2 deaths and 42 hospitalizations.

The two restaurants shared a distributor, Sweet N' Fresh Produce, and thought they had traced back the problem to its source, but subsequent tests by laboratories in New Jersey, New York State, and by FDA cleared the lettuce. Instead, they found that the lettuce tested by Jalapeños was likely cross-contaminated by green onions in the kitchen. Laboratory tests of green onions at Jalapeños confirmed E. coli contamination, though no remaining onions were available at Taco Taco for testing.

Investigators found no contamination in any samples taken from Sweet N' Fresh, or taken from two other suppliers also shared by the two restaurant chains. Investigators could not narrow down which supplier was at fault, as green onions had been regularly stored in common bins and the bacteria could have been from any one of them. The FBI opened an investigation into Sweet N' Fresh after they had received anonymous reports that the firm had known it had contaminated produce and sold it anyway, but have not responded to inquiries from reporters.

Early last week, when it became clear that the suppliers had sourced their green onions from Mexico, California, New Jersey, and Illinois, other states' farmers were let off the hook.

Towards the end of the week, cases started to show up in other states and in places where the two restaurant chains did not operate establishments. Laboratory tests were confirming that they were all from the same specific strain of the bacteria and therefore related. It became clear to federal and state investigators that the problem was bigger than they had thought, as some patients had not eaten in any restaurants supplied by Sweet N' Fresh or the other distributors. "We knew that it was in the supermarkets, and that's when the alarm bells really went off," said Jameson.

On Friday, FDA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, state officials, local public health workers, and others were gathering in Washington and holding conference calls every hour as new information came in. But they still could not narrow down the cause, and they decided they needed to make a public announcement.

By late Friday afternoon, FDA had issued a warning to customers that they should avoid all green onions except for those grown in Ohio and a list of other states and specific counties. It made the evening news and calls started coming into the health department from consumers looking for advice.

"I had just served green onions to my kids with dinner and I was in a panic," says Leigh Spencer. "I called the health department and it took forever to get through and then they had no idea what I was talking about. I called the supermarket and they couldn't tell me anything either. It was like nobody knew what was going on. I'm looking at my daughter at the same time I hear on the news a little boy died yesterday from food poisoning. It was frightening! Now we are just waiting and praying we don't all get sick."

When contacted by reporters, the county health department admitted they were caught off-guard by the initial announcement, but soon got up to speed and had proper advice. "These things happen very fast, and FDA felt it was important to get the word out to consumers as soon as possible," said county spokesperson Mary Evergreen, "The only downside was that we found out at the same time they did."

Some experts on news and radio programs have suggested washing the onions, but the FDA warning says that this "isn't protective." While washing produce is always a good idea and can remove bacteria on the surface of vegetables, they say, the bacteria can still get inside some plants or hide in crevices where they can't be washed out. "It reduces the risk, but doesn't eliminate it entirely," adds Jameson.

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## Facts:

- Date: October 15, 2007
- At time of article, 126 cases reported in 14 states, resulting in 42 hospitalizations and 2 deaths.
- By the end of the outbreak, there were 203 reported cases in 24 states, including 3 deaths and 68 hospitalizations. State breakdowns: New York State (21), New Jersey (19), Oregon (17), Pennsylvania (15), Wisconsin (14), Ohio (14), Utah (13), California (13), New Mexico (12), Indiana (11), Massachusetts (10), Arizona (9), Virginia (7), Minnesota (5), Idaho (4), Illinois (4), Colorado (4), Kentucky (3), Maryland (2), Michigan (2), Kansas (1), Washington State (1), Nevada (1), Connecticut(1)
- The first case of E. coli O157:H7 was reported in New York State on September 21, 2007
- Over the next two weeks, additional cases were identified in New York State and the cluster was identified; investigations in neighboring states identified additional cases, confirmed to be of the same strain
- Two restaurants were associated with the initially identified outbreak cases
- Initial identification of iceberg lettuce as the contaminated ingredient were reported to the media by the restaurants, and this led to confusion in reporting as public officials declined to comment and then identified green onions
- Multiple suppliers and distributors were subsequently identified as likely culprits, until further cases over the next week included individuals not associated with restaurants supplied by the suspected suppliers, and it became clear that the problem was not restricted to wholesale distributors, but also to retail
- On October 12, 2007, FDA and CDC issues joint warnings to consumers about green onions
- During the subsequent investigation, there were widespread accusations about Mexican onions led to calls for banning of imports of all produce from Mexico.
- As other states were added to the cleared list, green onions were very slow to make it back into the market and there was confusion as to when it was safe for consumers to eat them again. FDA would not say that green onions were 100% safe because they could not identify the specific cause.
- The investigation eventually revealed the contaminated onions to have been grown on farms in Riverside County, California that provided onions to a single processing facility, but it was never determined whether the problem occurred in a field, in multiple fields, during transport to the processing and packaging facility, or in the processing and packing plant.
- There were no matching strains from any tested fields, water sources, or nearby animal production facilities, though E. coli O157:H7 of other strains was identified in cattle pastures, feral pig feces, and a riverbed used for downstream irrigation.
- Jalapeños Tex Mex filed for bankruptcy in December, 2007. Taco Taco remains in business, though it reported large losses in the fall of 2007 and it took months to regain their market.