

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Listeriosis Outbreak Connected to Colorado Cantaloupes

A recent outbreak of listeriosis in the United States has resulted in 15 illnesses in four states. All illnesses started on or after August 15, 2011. The number of infected persons identified in each state is as follows: Colorado (11), Nebraska (1), Oklahoma (1), and Texas (2). Six listeriosis illnesses in Michigan, which were reported at the end of August, are currently being investigated by state and local health departments to determine if they are part of this outbreak.

Ongoing investigations by local, state, and federal public health and regulatory agencies indicate the likely source of the outbreak is a type of cantaloupe grown in the Rocky Ford region of southeastern Colorado. These cantaloupes are harvested in August and September, distributed widely in the United States, and currently available in grocery stores.

On September 9, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment advised persons in Colorado at high risk for severe listeriosis to avoid eating cantaloupes. CDC now advises persons throughout the mainland United States and at high risk for listeriosis to not eat cantaloupes marketed as coming from the Rocky Ford region of Colorado.

Listeriosis is a serious bacteria infection caused by eating food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. The disease primarily affects older adults, persons with weakened immune systems, pregnant women and newborns. Rarely, persons without these risk factors are affected.

A person with listeriosis usually has fever and muscle aches, often preceded by diarrhea or other gastrointestinal symptoms. Almost everyone who is diagnosed with listeriosis has "invasive" infection. "Invasive infection" occurs when the bacteria spread

from the intestines to the blood stream or other body sites. Symptoms and complications may vary:

- For persons other than pregnant women, symptoms include fever, muscle aches, headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, and convulsions.
- For pregnant women, symptoms usually include a mild, flu-like illness. However, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, or life-threatening infection of the newborn.

According to Rebecca Burns, Environmental Health Director at the Health Department, "Because contaminated cantaloupes may still be in grocery stores and in consumers' homes, the CDC recommends that older adults, persons with weakened immune systems, and pregnant women avoid cantaloupes marketed as coming from the Rocky Ford region of Colorado. Consumers who have cantaloupes in their homes can either check the label or inquire with the store as to where the cantaloupes were purchased. If your cantaloupe is identified as coming from the Rocky Ford region, please dispose of it in a closed plastic bag placed in a sealed trash can. This will help animals from being infected."

Since listeria can be found in other melons as well, the health department strongly urges residents to follow general melon safety guidelines:

- Consumers and food preparers should wash their hands before and after handling any whole melon, such as cantaloupe, watermelon, or honeydew.
- Wash the melons and dry them with a clean cloth or paper towel before cutting.
- Cut melon should be promptly consumed or refrigerated at or less than 40 degrees F (32-34 degrees F is optimal for storage of cut melon).
- Cut melons left at room temperature for more than 4 hours should be discarded.

Remember: food items other than cantaloupes can also carry *Listeria* bacteria. People at high risk for listeriosis and those who prepare their meals can take steps to lower the risk by following general food safety guidelines posted at the health department's website: www.bhsj.org.

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