

- NINA MOINI:** Minnesota's Health Department is investigating a salmonella outbreak linked to Chipotle and other quick-service Mexican restaurants so far. State health officials have identified 110 cases. They suspect jalapenos may be the source.
- Dana Eikmeier is an epidemiologist with MDH. And she is on the line now for more on the situation. Hi, Dana.
- DANA EIKMEIER:** Hi.
- NINA MOINI:** So what has MDH been able to confirm in terms of when the outbreak started and how many people have been affected?
- DANA EIKMEIER:** Yes, like you said before, we've got that 110 cases. The vast majority of those have reported eating at a Minnesota location of Chipotle. The meal dates that we have are from June 14 to July 14. But the majority of the meal dates for people have been June 24 through July 2.
- NINA MOINI:** How did you identify-- or at least you suspect that the jalapenos are the cause?
- DANA EIKMEIER:** Yeah, so whenever people test positive for an illness like salmonella, we do call them and ask them questions about their exposures that they had before they were ill. So through those interviews, we identified that people were eating at Chipotle. And then we called additional people to compare what ill people and non-ill people had been eating. So that's how we find outbreaks and outbreak vehicles.
- NINA MOINI:** Do you know for sure that it's jalapenos, or are you still investigating? You suspect that it's jalapenos?
- DANA EIKMEIER:** So as of right now, jalapenos are the suspected vehicle. We've been working with CDC and the FDA who does the traceback investigations. But jalapenos, they explain the majority-- or all of the cases here in Minnesota.
- NINA MOINI:** Is it possible that there are other cases in Minnesota that just haven't been reported or detected yet?
- DANA EIKMEIER:** Yes, so the cases that are reported are just the people who sought care and tested positive. So there are likely more cases that did not seek care. And then, also, there is a lag in reporting, so the cases that we have now, they were sick back in mid-July. So we expect there to be more cases filling in. But we don't think that this is an ongoing risk to the public based on the interventions that have been put into place.
- NINA MOINI:** And let's talk about that a little bit. Have you been able to trace this back to a single producer? How has Chipotle responded?
- DANA EIKMEIER:** So Chipotle has been fully collaborating with every aspect of the investigation, so ranging from providing records, information about their foods as well as putting in mitigation steps to prevent further transmission. So they have removed all of the suspected jalapenos from all restaurants that received that product. And so those jalapenos should not be in Minnesota anymore.
- NINA MOINI:** OK, and you mentioned this, that the Federal Food and Drug Administration is carrying out this traceback investigation to try to learn more. What kind of information are you receiving from them, the coordination that happens between the state and the federal level?

DANA EIKMEIER: Yeah, as a state, our job is to collect the information within the states. So we collect invoices, shipping records, things like that, and we share those with our federal partners. We can't act outside of Minnesota. And there's other states, of course, involved in this, as well. So FDA coordinates that information with those other states, and then can trace things back to the farm level in the US or maybe even in other countries.

NINA MOINI: So between cyclospora and this, it's been a hard summer. I'm guessing there are people who are wondering if we're seeing more foodborne outbreaks. Is that truly the case? Or is it just that we're paying attention more?

DANA EIKMEIER: I mean, both things can be true. I would say that we have had just a lot of diarrheal illness reported here in Minnesota. The summertime is our peak season for bacterial infections and cyclospora. So there's a lot going on, and there always is in the summer. But there have been a couple of large outbreaks like this salmonella outbreak associated with Chipotle that have really been pushing up that case count.

NINA MOINI: So I'm wondering for people who maybe are concerned, if you want to talk a little bit about symptoms that people should be on the lookout for, and what the level of caution that the public should take in light of this outbreak.

DANA EIKMEIER: Yeah, of course, so salmonella, usually, from the time you are exposed to it to the time you become sick is usually about a day to about a week. And the symptoms you'd expect would be diarrhea, sometimes with fever, stomach cramps, vomiting, sometimes bloody diarrhea. In general, it is self-limiting. And people will recover on their own after about a week or so.

And there isn't a super hard rule on when to seek care. And you need to use your own judgment. But generally speaking, if your diarrhea is severe and you might be getting dehydrated or if you have underlying conditions putting you at higher risk for complications or if your illness has been lasting for more than a few days or if you're just in general concerned, then we would recommend that you seek out health care.

NINA MOINI: OK, let's-- oh, go ahead, Dana. I was going to ask you about the--

DANA EIKMEIER: I was going to say--

NINA MOINI: --what they should do.

DANA EIKMEIER: Oh, yeah, so I was just going to say, as far as hospitalizations, we have had about 20% of cases have been hospitalized. And that's about what we'd expect to see for salmonella. So there's not an indication that this is a more severe strain of salmonella than other salmonellas.

NINA MOINI: And as far as what people should do to protect themselves?

DANA EIKMEIER: So to protect yourselves, just the normal food safety precautions, handwashing; cooking foods to hot, to 160; and preventing cross-contamination are the best ways that you can protect yourself from salmonella.

NINA MOINI: And just to reiterate, the risk of the Chipotle, because you've been able to mitigate it, that is not an ongoing situation right now.

DANA EIKMEIER: So these particular jalapenos, they shouldn't be in Minnesota anymore. So this particular situation, we don't have reason to believe that it is ongoing.

NINA MOINI: Thanks, Dana. I appreciate your help with this.

DANA Yeah, of course.

EIKMEIER:

NINA MOINI: Dana Eikmeier is an epidemiologist with the Minnesota Department of Health.