

Salmonella Typhimurium Outbreak in Michigan Linked to Consumption of Raw Alfalfa Sprouts

Contact: James McCurtis Jr. or Jennifer Holton 517.241.2112 or 517.241.2485

Agency: Community Health

October 9, 2009

LANSING, MI - The Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) and Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) are issuing a public health alert regarding illness from Salmonella infections among people who have reported raw alfalfa sprouts consumption in Michigan. At this time, MDCH and MDA are recommending that people, especially young children, frail or elderly people, and others with weakened immune systems, avoid consumption of raw alfalfa sprouts until we have further information about the origin of the contaminated sprouts. Other types of sprouts have not been implicated.

Michigan has 12 confirmed Salmonella Typhimurium cases from seven jurisdictions in Michigan (Bay, Genesee, Kent, Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne Counties) involved in the current outbreak. The illness onset dates range from Aug. 17 to Sept. 18, 2009. There have been two known hospitalizations. MDCH and MDA are working closely with local health departments, the CDC and the FDA to determine the source of the outbreak.

"Eating raw sprouts is a known risk for exposure to Salmonella or E. coli O157:H7 bacteria," said Dr. Gregory Holzman, chief medical executive for MDCH. "We want to educate people about this known risk in order for them to make informed decisions concerning their health."

Sprouts are the germinating form of seeds and beans and are frequently eaten raw in sandwiches and salads. Past sprout-related outbreaks of foodborne illness have been linked to seeds contaminated by fecal materials in the field, during storage, or as a result of poor hygienic practices in the production of sprouts. In addition, the warm and humid conditions required to grow sprouts are ideal for the rapid growth of bacteria.

In general, the FDA recommends these guidelines for those who choose to continue to eat sprouts:

- Cook all sprouts thoroughly before eating to significantly reduce the risk of illness.
- Sandwiches and salads purchased at restaurants and delicatessens often contain raw sprouts. Consumers who wish to reduce their risk of food borne illness should specifically request that raw sprouts not be added to their food.
- Homegrown sprouts also present a health risk if eaten raw or lightly cooked. Many outbreaks have been attributed to contaminated seed. If pathogenic bacteria are present in or on seed, they can grow to high levels during sprouting even under clean conditions.

Salmonellosis is a disease caused by the bacterium is an infection with bacteria called Salmonella. Most persons infected with Salmonella develop diarrhea, fever, and abdominal cramps 12 to 72 hours after infection. The illness usually lasts four to seven days, and most people recover without treatment. The elderly, infants, and those with weak immune systems are more likely to have a severe illness. Anyone who has recently eaten raw alfalfa sprouts and is experiencing symptoms should contact their healthcare provider and their local health department.