news release

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Health officials confirm four linked cases
of E. coli in Humboldt County

Officials from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) have confirmed that since July four Humboldt County residents have become ill with genetically linked E. coli infections.

DHHS Public Health officials have been working closely with representatives from the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) to track down the source of these infections.

"In July of this year, Public Health had a case of E. coli reported. That itself isn't particularly unusual," said DHHS Public Health Nurse Eric Gordon. "We investigated that case and that was the end of the story we thought. Then, in the middle of August, we had another E. coli case come up, which also isn't anything out of the ordinary."

But then in October, two more cases of E. coli surfaced. Routine lab tests sent to the CDPH in July, August and October revealed that all four local cases came from the same source.

"The state genetically linked all four of these cases," Gordon said. "They determined that the cases were caused by a very specific strain of E. coli that hadn't been seen anywhere else in California. This means the same organism was causing illness in all four of these people from Humboldt County.

"It'd be like if you had 10 burglaries in a neighborhood and you fingerprinted all of them and four of them came back as the same fingerprint, you'd know that four of the cases were by the same robber," he said. "We know that these four E. coli cases are from the same source, that the same organism caused these folks to get sick."

But to date, Gordon said, DHHS Public Health officials have yet to determine the source.

"Typically, the causes are something you ate, something you bought at a store or maybe from a restaurant worker who didn't wash his hands and contaminated some food," he said.

All of the patients have been interviewed to find out what they had eaten and where they had eaten prior to getting sick.

DHHS Public Health is also seeking help from the area's health care providers to solve the mystery behind these recent E. coli infections.

"We contacted our local providers and we're asking them to identify any cases of bloody diarrhea and to send those lab samples to us," Gordon said. "The thought behind that is if we identify more cases, we'll have more people to interview which increases the chances of us finding the smoking gun."

Common symptoms of E. coli infection include bloody diarrhea, abdominal cramping, nausea and vomiting. Three of the Humboldt County cases progressed to hemolytic uremic syndrome, a serious complication of E. coli infection characterized by kidney failure.

"Many strains of E. coli live in the intestines of healthy people and animals. They are harmless and are an important part of a healthy human intestinal tract," said DHHS Public Health Director Susan Buckley. "However, there are some strains of E. coli, such as O157:H7 which has been found locally in recent months, that can make people sick and cause significant health problems."

"People most often get sick one to 10 days after exposure," Gordon said. "If people are sick with the symptoms described, it is recommended that they see their medical provider who can order simple lab tests to determine what might be causing their illness. With these lab tests, the DHHS Public Health Laboratory can determine if it is a specific strain of E. coli that can cause serious disease."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 265,000 E. coli infections occur in the United States each year. The O157:H7 strain causes about 36 percent of these infections.

The CDC states that one of best ways to protect yourself against E. coli infections is to practice proper hygiene, such as washing your hands thoroughly after using the bathroom or changing diapers and before preparing or eating food. If soap and water aren't available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

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