



Philadelphia Department of Public Health
Division of Disease Control

CARMEN I. PARIS, M.P.H.
Interim Health Commissioner

JOSEPH C. CRONAUER
Executive Deputy / Chief of Staff

Caroline C. Johnson, MD
Director, Division of Disease Control

Health Alert

Multi-state Outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7 Infections Associated With Taco Bell Restaurants

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Public health officials from CDC and state and local health departments in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Delaware and Connecticut are investigating an outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7 infections related to the consumption of food at Taco Bell restaurants. Green onions have been implicated as a possible source of the bacteria in preliminary tests performed by the restaurant chain. Additional environmental testing and an epidemiological investigation are underway. Both the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) are participating in the outbreak investigation. As of 1 PM on December 6th 2006, 43 *E. coli* O157:H7 cases are under investigation in 5 states. One of these cases has been linked to a Taco Bell restaurant in the city of Philadelphia. "DNA fingerprinting" by pulsed field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) is underway on the bacterial isolates.

As a precautionary step, on December 6th PDPH asked all Taco Bell restaurants in Philadelphia to close voluntarily. PDPH will work with these restaurants to assure that the facilities are cleaned and sanitized, existing food products are discarded and restocked from a safe supplier, and that restaurant employees are evaluated for symptomatic or asymptomatic infection with *E. coli* O157:H7, as appropriate.

E. coli O157:H7 bacteria usually cause severe, often bloody, diarrhea. Generally, symptoms of illness occur 3-7 days after exposure to the organism. Although most healthy adults recover completely, some people can develop a form of kidney failure called hemolytic-uremic syndrome (HUS), which may lead to kidney damage and death. *E. coli* O157:H7 can be acquired by consuming food contaminated with *E. coli* or through oral-fecal spread from person to person, which may occur when hand hygiene and sanitation is poor.

Clinicians are asked to perform shiga toxin testing and stool culture on all patients who have a history of consuming food from Taco Bell since Nov 15th and present with symptoms compatible with *E. coli* O157:H7 infection. Clinicians should note that **antibiotic treatment of *E. coli* O157:H7 may be associated with a worsening disease course, e.g., development of HUS, and therefore, is not routinely recommended.** All suspected and confirmed cases should be reported to the Department of Public Health immediately.

To report suspected or probable cases of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection, please call the Division of Disease Control (DDC) during business hours at (215) 685-6740. After business hours call (215) 686-1776, and ask to speak to on-call staff for DDC.