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# Understanding the Multistate Cyclospora Outbreak Linked to Shredded Lettuce

Public Health * Epidemiology * Microbes

Federal public health investigations by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have traced a major multistate outbreak of cyclosporiasis to shredded iceberg lettuce served at restaurants across five states: Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and West Virginia [1, 2] . With more than 1,640 confirmed illnesses and nearly 100 hospitalizations reported before the contaminated supply was removed, the event highlights why microscopic foodborne parasites remain a persistent challenge for fresh produce safety [1, 3] .

## Outbreak Summary & Traceback Findings

| Parameter | | CDC / FDA Investigation Finding |

| Causative Organism | | Cyclospora cayetanensis (single-celled intestinal parasite) |

| Confirmed Cases | | 1,644 laboratory-confirmed illnesses (~100 hospitalizations; 0 deaths) [1] |

| Primary States Affected | | Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and West Virginia [1, 2] |

| Identified Vehicle | | Shredded iceberg lettuce traced to a single agricultural supplier in central Mexico [3] |

## What Is Cyclospora cayetanensis?

Unlike common foodborne bacteria such as Salmonella or Escherichia coli , Cyclospora cayetanensis is a single-celled eukaryotic parasite belonging to the phylum Apicomplexa -- the same broad biological group that includes the malaria parasite [1, 4] . When a person swallows food or water contaminated with the parasite, it travels to the small intestine and invades the cells lining the gut wall, triggering inflammation that interferes with normal water and nutrient absorption [4] .

A defining biological quirk of Cyclospora is its life cycle outside the human body. Infected individuals shed the parasite in an immature, microscopic capsule called an oocyst (pronounced oh-oh-sist ). Because these freshly shed oocysts are not yet infectious, Cyclospora almost never spreads directly from one person to another -- for example, from an infected food handler in a restaurant kitchen [1, 3] . Instead, the oocysts must spend roughly one to two weeks in warm, moist outdoor environments (typically between 22 deg C and 32 deg C) to mature -- a process biologists call sporulation -- before they can infect another person [4] .

## Why Leafy Greens Are Vulnerable

Because Cyclospora requires days or weeks in the environment to become infectious, outbreaks are almost always traced back to the farm or packing level rather than local kitchens [3] . Contamination typically occurs when agricultural irrigation water or crop-washing water comes into contact with human waste containing mature oocysts. Leafy greens such as iceberg lettuce, cilantro, and basil have microscopic surface grooves and waxy coatings that allow sticky oocysts to cling tightly to the leaves, even after standard household rinsing [3, 4] .

Furthermore, the tough outer wall of the Cyclospora oocyst acts like a natural shield. Standard chlorine concentrations used to sanitize fresh produce wash water kill most surface bacteria, but they are largely ineffective against Cyclospora oocysts without damaging the delicate lettuce leaves themselves [4] .

## Symptoms, Diagnosis, and Treatment

Symptoms of cyclosporiasis usually appear about seven days after eating contaminated produce. The hallmark sign is prolonged, watery diarrhea accompanied by abdominal cramping, bloating, loss of appetite, weight loss, and fatigue [1] . If left untreated, the illness can last for several weeks or cycle through periods of improvement and relapse [1] .

Because routine stool tests for bacteria do not automatically screen for Cyclospora , healthcare providers must request specialized molecular (PCR) or microscopic parasite testing [1] . Unlike viral stomach bugs, cyclosporiasis responds well to targeted antimicrobial medication -- most commonly a combination antibiotic called trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole -- which clears the parasite from the digestive tract [1, 4] .

## References & Primary Sources

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