Salmonella Dublin outbreak alert!

There is currently an outbreak of Salmonella Dublin that has killed at least one person, sickened 10 and put eight in the hospital. The outbreak has been reported in six states. The hospitalization rate for most strains of salmonella is around 20%, so the 80% hospitalization rate for this strain is unusually high. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is working to identify and connect these illnesses. While a single supplier or facility has not been identified, interviews with those who have contracted the illness indicate that they all ate ground beef. However, each was from a different brand, type or location. There has been a positive test for the strain in repackaged leftover ground beef in the home of an ill person in California. So far, the CDC has not advised consumers to stop eating ground beef or retailers to stop selling it, but they are reminding consumers of safe handling and cooking practices.

What is Salmonella Dublin?

Salmonella Dublin is a bacterial disease that can cause pneumonia, diarrhea and reproductive losses. It is typically found in dairy cows where it can spread through the herd, but it is killed through the milk pasteurization process. The prevalence in US dairy herds has been increasing over the past 20 years. Many cattle who are infected die, but for those who survive, the infection can be persistent and spread to other animals. Antibiotics can help but do not always completely eradicate the infection. There is a vaccine available for calves, but its effectiveness is unclear.

As the cost of milk declines due to production far outpacing demand, some dairy farmers are selling their dairy cows for meat production. This could explain how Salmonella Dublin has gotten into ground beef.
Will product contamination insurance coverage apply?

According to the Department of Agriculture, salmonella in both beef and poultry is not from processing contamination, and thus, it has not resulted in recalls but rather public health alerts reminding consumers to handle meat and poultry correctly. In the past, this has caused problems with product recall coverage where neither the contamination nor government recall triggers were met. However, in November 2018, JBS, a leading meat processor, recalled 6.5 million pounds of ground beef product because of Salmonella Newport. This recall was classified as Class I and would have met the government recall trigger on some product contamination policies. There were no deaths, and the hospitalization rate was 30%, compared to the 80% hospitalization rate and one death reported so far in the current Salmonella Dublin outbreak. If a source for this outbreak is found, it can be inferred that there may be a Class I recall.

In response to an E. coli outbreak in November 2018, the CDC advised consumers not to eat romaine lettuce. This alert did not identify any one producer and was not a recall, so it did not rise to the adverse publicity or government recall triggers. Eventually, a producer was identified, and because they had product that was confirmed to be contaminated, they had coverage. However, all other producers and retailers that had to destroy their product were not covered. If the current situation prompts the CDC to issue an alert advising consumers not to eat ground beef, it is unlikely that the majority of insureds will be covered under their standard contaminated products insurance policy.

How can consumers protect themselves?

Consumers should never eat raw or undercooked ground beef. Cooked ground beef should be at an internal temperature of at least 160 degrees Fahrenheit as measured by a meat thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the meat. The first line of defense against spreading pathogens is good hand washing and hygiene. Care should be taken to avoid cross contamination by taking steps to sanitize all surfaces, tools and cutting boards that have come into contact with any raw meat products. Follow all instructions on the safe food handling label.
What can producers, processors and manufacturers do?

Always follow good manufacturing practices and ensure that your hazard analysis and critical control point (HACCP) plan not only is followed but also has properly analyzed all present hazards. A strong environmental testing program can pick up a problem before it gets into product. Test-and-hold procedures can prevent your facility from releasing contaminated product into the stream of commerce. All efforts should be made to cooperate and comply with requests from regulatory agencies.

PEOPLE INFECTED WITH THE OUTBREAK STRAIN OF SALMONELLA DUBLIN, BY DATE OF ILLNESS ONSET*

*n=10 for whom information was reported as of Nov. 1, 2019. Some illness onset dates have been estimated from other reported information. Source: cdc.gov/salmonella/dublin-11-19/epi.html.