



## NEWS RELEASE

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For More Information, Contact:  
Michelle Feist  
Division of Disease Control  
North Dakota Department of Health  
Phone: 701.328.2378  
E-mail: [mafeist@nd.gov](mailto:mafeist@nd.gov)

### **Health Department Investigating Cluster of *E. coli* Cases**

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Health is investigating a possible cluster of shiga toxin - producing *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) (STEC) infections in eastern North Dakota. Three cases have been reported and all are less than 18 years of age and reported attending the Red River Valley Fair in West Fargo. The fair was held July 7 through 12. One of the cases has been diagnosed with hemolytic uremic syndrome, a severe complication of STEC infections.

STEC is a bacterial infection that can cause abdominal cramping, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and bloody diarrhea. Symptoms can be severe resulting in dehydration and electrolyte imbalances. A complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome can occur, in which red blood cells are damaged. These damaged red blood cells can cause kidney damage and kidney failure. People usually get sick within 3 to 4 days from the time of infection, but it can take as long as 10 days for symptoms to appear. People who have symptoms of STEC should consult with their health care provider.

“We are in the early stages of this investigation and are asking people who became sick with diarrhea or bloody diarrhea for more than 24 hours within ten days of attending the fair to let us know,” said Michelle Feist, an epidemiologist with the Division of Disease Control. “Although the cases reported having contact with animals while at the fair, we are looking into other possible exposures as well.”

STEC is shed in the stool of infected animals and people. STEC infections can result from eating contaminated food, drinking contaminated water, coming into contact with animals that are carrying STEC and can be spread from person to person through inadequate hygiene. Undercooked meats, especially ground beef, contaminated produce or sprouts and attending petting zoos have all been implicated in STEC outbreaks in the United States. Animals may be infected and not have symptoms but can shed the bacteria.

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To reduce the risk of STEC infections, people should do the following:

- Cook meats to the proper temperature
- Wash all fresh produce before consuming
- Keep ready to eat foods separate from raw meat areas where meats are being prepared
- Clean food preparation areas with soap and water
- Use a household disinfectant to disinfect food preparation areas
- Wash hands with soap and water
  - Before and after preparing meals
  - Before eating
  - After using the bathroom
  - After changing diapers or assisting others in the bathroom
  - After handling or touching animals
- People who have STEC and work in sensitive jobs should not return to work until they are asymptomatic and have two consecutive stool cultures that are negative. These jobs include:
  - Health care providers
  - Child care providers
  - Food handlers
- Children who attend child care should not return to child care until they are asymptomatic and have two consecutive negative stool cultures.

People who have questions about this cluster can call the North Dakota Department of Health at 1.800.472.2180 (ND toll free) or 701.328.2378.

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