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Officials: Avoid unpasteurized Mitchell Hill Farm cider

BY ANNE STANTON

astanton@record-eagle.com

— ELLSWORTH — Antrim County Health Department officials warn consumers to stay away from unpasteurized apple cider produced by Mitchell Hill Farm in Ellsworth until tests confirm whether it's the source of E. coli poisoning.

Three Antrim County residents sought hospital care for severe abdominal pain and diarrhea after they apparently drank Mitchell Hill Farm apple cider, said Dan Reynolds, administrative services manager for the Health Department of Northwest Michigan.

Test results from cider samples should be ready in a week or two, depending on how long it takes to grow the cultures, said Jennifer Holden, communications director for the state Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

A person who answered a Record-Eagle reporter's call to Mitchell Hill Farm on Tuesday declined comment.

Health officials obtained a search warrant last week to inspect Mitchell Hill Farm. They found evidence that its proprietor, Jim Ruster, fell short of meeting federal health and safety standards and prepared food under unsanitary conditions. The farm also lacked a license to produce unpasteurized apple cider, Reynolds said.

"It's not illegal to sell unpasteurized cider, but you have to adhere to federal regulations and include labeling," he said. "So we're telling consumers to look out for unlabeled cider. If it's unpasteurized, it has to carry appropriate warning labels and it has to be sold by a licensed distributor.

"The best litmus test is to avoid cider without any label at all," Reynolds said. "At that point, you have no idea what facility it comes from."

The presence of E. coli indicates that trace of amounts of fecal matter have been introduced to food, either from animal or human sources, Reynolds said.

"If conditions are unsanitary, the chances are much higher. A lot of people who make unpasteurized cider are licensed and do adhere to the rules," he said.

The state Department of Agriculture assisted in the inspection and took samples, Reynolds said.

Reynolds said his department continues to investigate whether Mitchell Hill apple cider was distributed to stores and where the three sickened people obtained the cider.

Joshua Meyerson, the health department's medical director, also sent an alert to local hospitals and urgent care clinics asking them to keep an eye out for people suffering from E. coli poisoning.

Online resources describe Mitchell Hill Farm as an organic, community supported agriculture business that grows summer and fall vegetables without antibiotics, hormones and chemicals.