

NEWS/HEALTH

Don't eat romaine lettuce, Americans and Canadians are warned

Another *E. coli* outbreak has hit the leafy green. So far, 32 people in 11 states have been infected, as well as 18 people in Canada.

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Romaine lettuce is unsafe to eat, federal health officials told consumers Tuesday in a sweeping alert that also cautioned retailers not to sell it and restaurants not to serve it.

The popular but beleaguered leafy green is contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7, a sometimes-deadly microbe and inhabitant of the intestinal tract of cattle, where it is a harmless bacterium. How it found its way into a salad green remains a mystery, U.S. Food and Drug Administration officials said.



Health officials are warning people not to eat romaine lettuce. Photo Credit: Barry Sloan

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Among the 32 cases in this country, 13 people have been hospitalized.

FDA officials say they're collaborating with health authorities in Canada, but the source of the outbreak strain remains unknown.

Tuesday's wide-ranging alert that cautioned the public not to eat the lettuce was issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The new outbreak arrives just months after another romaine scare swept across the country. Five people died in that outbreak, which infected 210 and hospitalized 96. A 2017 *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak also contaminated romaine.

Michael Hansen, senior scientist with Consumer Reports Advocacy in Yonkers, said the current outbreak is unique, driven by a strain of *E. coli* O157:H7 that differs from the previous scares.

"This is the third *E. coli*-related outbreak linked to romaine lettuce. Hopefully this time they will get to the bottom of it," Hansen said.

He added that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uses sophisticated DNA identification technology to distinguish one strain of *E. coli* from another, a factor that has allowed them to unequivocally say the current outbreak is unrelated to previous ones.

Major supermarket chains have already begun discarding the tainted lettuce.

Super Stop & Shop, which operates more than 400 stores in New York, New England and New Jersey, has already begun discarding the contaminated lettuce.

“Stop & Shop is aware of the CDC advisory that all romaine lettuce may be linked to some cases of E. coli illness nationally. While a recall has not been issued at this time, in an abundance of caution, Stop & Shop is voluntarily removing all products that might be impacted by this advisory from store shelves,” the company said in a statement Tuesday.

In Albany, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said it’s important to pay heed to the federal health warnings.

“As we prepare to gather with family and friends for the Thanksgiving holiday, I urge all New Yorkers to follow the CDC's guidelines and refrain from eating or serving romaine lettuce until it is safe to do so,” Cuomo said.

On Long Island, chefs are taking news of the romaine ban with a grain of salt.

“It’s a great opportunity to showcase another vegetable,” said Allison Fasano, executive chef at Harley’s American Grille in Farmingdale.

Fasano has used romaine lettuce for Harley’s grilled Caesar salad, but the chef seemed unfazed about redirecting to other greens, noting that food price spikes and bans happen periodically. “There are so many other types of lettuce,” she said.

Dario’s in Rockville Centre is one of Long Island’s last remaining strongholds of tableside-tossed Caesar. The restaurant has been serving it in the present location since 1997, and in West Hempstead for almost 18 years before that.

Dario Visovich, chef and son of the the restaurant’s founder, is planning to be creative. “We can make the Caesar salad with iceberg lettuce, we can make it with kale. You know, kale is getting more popular all the time,” he said.