

5 infected with E. coli in Calaveras

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SAN ANDREAS -- Two Calaveras County teenage brothers have been infected with the same virulent strain of the E. coli bacterium that has left a young Angels Camp boy hospitalized with serious kidney problems for the past three weeks.

This follows two cases diagnosed earlier this month in the county.

The two most recent cases involving the teens, who were not identified, were made public by the county Public Health Department, bringing the number of confirmed cases in the county to five -- all children.

Dr. Dean Kelaita, the county's health officer, said health officials haven't established any link between the initial three cases and the latest two cases.

"But we're continuing to look at all possible angles on that," Kelaita said.

Most E. coli infections come from eating undercooked, contaminated ground beef, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Infection also can occur after drinking raw milk and after swimming in or drinking sewage-contaminated water.

E. coli can cause bloody diarrhea and severe cramps.

Kelaita said the five cases of E. coli are of a strain known as O157:H7, which produces a powerful toxin that can cause severe illness.

The first case was diagnosed May 1 in 4-year-old Nicholas Kristoff, who has been receiving treatment since May 5 at Children's Hospital & Research Center in Oakland.

Nicholas, who was listed in fair condition Tuesday, has encountered major health problems and had to undergo kidney dialysis to treat a complication known as hemolytic uremic syndrome, in which red blood cells are destroyed and the kidneys fail.

"The first three weeks, it was nothing but bad news every day," said his mother, Staci Kristoff, on Tuesday from the hospital.

"But now, he's breathing on his own and coughing -- getting a lot of the fluid out of his lungs. And his kidneys are getting back to normal," said Kristoff, who was told her son would be hospitalized at least two more weeks.

Kelaita said from 2 percent to 7 percent of those infected with E. coli develop hemolytic uremic syndrome, which is more common in elderly people and children younger than 6.

Nicholas's 8-month-old sister, Abigail Kristoff, and another unidentified child, also tested positive for the bacterium, but neither required hospitalization.

The two unidentified boys, ages 17 and 14, who contracted E. coli were not hospitalized and are being watched, Kelaita said.

The 17-year-old attends Bret Harte Union High School. School officials on Tuesday told students and parents about the illness, said Superintendent Joseph Wilimek of the Bret Harte Union High School District. Wilimek said the student did not contract the illness at school.

Kelaita said the three younger children first diagnosed with E. coli attended the same home day-care center and had person-to-person contact in the center and play group.

And the two teenage boys who contracted E. coli had shown livestock at the county fair last week.

Kelaita said it is fairly common for the E. coli 0157:H7 bacterium to be found in and around livestock venues. He said thoroughly cooking meat, particularly ground beef to at least 160 degrees, reduces the chances of E. coli-related illnesses. And frequent hand washing can prevent the spread of the illness, he said.

County health officials said those with diarrheal illness should seek prompt medical attention. The department has notified area doctors and recommended testing and reporting people suffering from diarrhea.

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