

Child Hit by E. coli
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By ERIN MAYES

A 4-year-old Angels Camp boy is in serious condition at an Oakland hospital after contracting an E. coli infection last week.

It's unknown how or where Nicholas Kristoff came into contact with the bacteria -- contracted most often through undercooked meat, especially ground beef, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Nicholas and his sister, Abigail, both were found to have the organism in their bodies, but only Nicholas suffered a violent reaction. Their sister, Elizabeth, did not have E. coli in her system.

An e-mail to friends from Nicholas' father, Mike Kristoff, describes his shock when he saw his son at Children's Hospital and Research Center at Oakland.

"Right now they have a large catheter in his neck, which is pulling blood out, running it through the dialysis machine, filtering out all the toxins ... and the(n) putting the clean blood back into his neck," Kristoff wrote last Thursday. "At first sight of this earlier today, I gasped at what my four and a half year old son is undergoing and battling."

Nicholas' grandfather, Bob Reed, this morning said the boy was put on a respirator after his kidneys and liver shut down and that he now has pneumonia.

And while the child "is not out of the woods," there is some good news. Blood flow has been restored to Nicholas' kidneys and doctors planned to take him off dialysis today.

"We're hoping that he will begin a recovery period," the grandfather said.

"It's a very serious, unfortunate situation," said Del Smith, who works with Kristoff at Greenhorn Creek. Smith manages the resort and Kristoff is the controller. "As you can imagine, it's happened so quickly and it's just been fairly traumatic for the family. ... they're just watching by the minute."

Nicholas has the most harmful strain of E. coli, which has the full name E. coli O157:H7, said Dr. Dean Kelaita, Calaveras County public health officer.

Kelaita said the virus is "gastrointestinal in nature" and is more worrisome in children than in adults because children's immune systems are less developed.

Infection can lead to nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, and lead to a high fever.

"People can be pretty sick, and in children there can be a complication," he said. That complication is Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome -- the loss of kidney function Nicholas now suffers from.

Kelaita said his department is investigating how Nicholas and Abigail may have contracted E. coli, but no leads have turned up. The family has not traveled recently, nor eaten in restaurants, he said.

The family's children have been in contact with other children who are in the same play group, the doctor said, so his department sent letters to the parents of children who may have been exposed and recommended siblings of those children be tested.

"No one else has gotten sick so far," he said. "There doesn't appear to be any threat to the public."

Anyone exposed to the bacteria would begin to show signs of infection within 24 hours, he said.

This is not the first time Calaveras County has seen children contract E. coli.

A few years ago, several children ranging in age from 3 to 9 fell ill after they ate food in the livestock area at the Calaveras County Fair and Jumping Frog Jubilee, Kelaita said.

"It's thought that the manure of the animals could contain that bacteria, and when they're hanging out in the livestock area, playing in the hay, that's one of the ways that could be spread," he said.

He said all of those children fully recovered, although one was quite ill and took several weeks to regain health.

None of the Kristoff children have been in contact with livestock, he said.

With the fair starting this Thursday, the doctor said it is timely to emphasize measures such as washing hands frequently and not eating near livestock to prevent the spread of E. coli.

He said he also discourages eating raw or undercooked meat.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, E. coli may also be found on sprouts, lettuce, salami and unpasteurized milk and juice.

It may be contracted by swimming in or drinking sewage-contaminated water.

The harmful strain that Nicholas now battles was first recognized in 1982 after an outbreak of severe bloody diarrhea that was traced to contaminated hamburgers, according to the DHHS.

A donation fund has been set up at Guaranteed Savings Bank, 479 S. Main St., Angels Camp, for the Kristoff family. For more information call 736-4561.