

MIDDAY EXPRESS

*News from the Press and Communication Service's midday
briefing*

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Statement by Commissioner Dalli on the E. coli outbreak

Good morning,

Over the past few days, we have been facing a serious crisis. My thoughts are with the victims and their families and those who have lost loved ones to whom I extend my most sincere condolences.

According to the latest information, this outbreak of E. coli is responsible for nine (9) deaths in Germany and one (1) in Sweden.

In Germany, 1,169 cases have been recorded. Out of these, 373 developed the more serious form of the disease, the so-called HUS. Sporadic cases are reported in seven other

Member States. Switzerland has also reported two cases and the United States three.

The epicentre of the disease is the area around Hamburg in the northern part of Germany. Most of the cases reported outside this Member State concern either German nationals travelling or persons who visited the country.

Now... what have we done to cope with this rapidly developing situation?

- We activated immediately all our networks responsible for managing crises. As they are in daily contact, the networks allow for the timely exchange of information thus laying the ground for rapid action.
- We have asked the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) to do a risk assessment. It delivered in two days.
- Our EU reference laboratory in Rome developed a method that reduces the time needed to detect the E. Coli bacterium in food, from about six days to 48 hours. This was also achieved in record-breaking time – it took about a week to do it.
- The Commission services –at all levels– have been in constant contact with the national authorities and other involved parties through all possible means: phone calls, audio-conferences, meetings. The last one was

yesterday's Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health, where the Member States endorsed a joint statement on the issue.

In short, and as the joint statement testifies, we have been working hand-in-hand with the Member States with one common goal – to bring this outbreak to an end as soon as possible.

In order to do that, we need to take all efforts to rapidly identify the source of contamination. The initial suspicion of the German authorities that cucumbers from Spain were the cause has not been confirmed by the test results available up to now. Despite the fact that the sampled cucumbers did test positive to E. coli, they did not confirm the presence of the specific serotype which is responsible for the outbreak affecting humans. Intensive work is taking place to pinpoint the source of contamination. While recognising the huge efforts invested by all, I urge the Member States and in particular Germany to increase their efforts in that direction. We stand next to them and we will do our utmost to assist in any possible way.

In the meantime, the public should remain calm and keep applying basic hygiene rules when preparing food.

Before closing, I would like to raise briefly two more points:

The first concerns references to ban certain products. I would like to stress again, in the strongest possible way, that the outbreak is limited geographically to an area surrounding the city of Hamburg. Furthermore, according to the latest information we have available from Germany, it appears that the outbreak is on decline – fewer people have been hospitalised over the past couple of days than before. Let us also keep in mind that efforts to pinpoint all possible sources of contamination are ongoing. We would, therefore, consider any ban on any product as disproportionate.

Finally, we are also very sensitive to the financial impact that this crisis is already having on farmers, in particular, vegetable producers. What I can say at this moment, is that I am working closely with my colleague – Commissioner Dacian Ciolos – to address the hardship faced by this group of our citizens that has also been hit hard by the E. coli outbreak.

Fruit and vegetables need to be washed thoroughly. The same applies for hands before preparing food or eating, and after using the bathroom or changing diapers. Washing thoroughly knives, plates and other utensils limits the risk of cross-contamination.

Thank you for your attention.

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