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and preventing disease.*

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Whatcom County *E. coli* O157:H7 Outbreak Update: 2:00 PM April 30 2015

BELLINGHAM— The Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD) is investigating an outbreak of shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* O157:H7 associated with the Milk Makers Fest that was held at the Northwest Fairgrounds in Lynden on 4/21 – 4/23/15. Over a thousand primary school children from all of the school districts in Whatcom County attended the event.

WCHD is continuing to interview cases to determine if there was a common food or water source or activity, such as the petting zoo or other contact with livestock.

Cumulative total: 17 cases* (4 cases have been hospitalized), 15 probable cases **
Change since last report 4/28/15: +13 cases, +2 hospitalizations

*Cases include those with positive labs (confirmed by the WA State Public Health Lab), presumptive positive labs (positive preliminary labs at PeaceHealth or other commercial labs), and clinical cases with close contact with a case with positive or presumptive positive labs.

** Probable cases are cases with clinical symptoms and were associated with the event, but lab results are not available or labs were not done.

Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* (STEC) infections are caused by bacteria found in the guts of many mammals, some of which can cause severe infections. It takes only a relatively few (hundreds) of bacteria to cause infection. The bacteria can contaminate food, water, or surfaces where they can go from hand to mouth. Secondary cases are common among household members. Illness occurs 1-8 days after infection, and can be mild or severe. Symptoms include cramping diarrhea which can become bloody after a few days. Usually there is no fever, or only a low grade one. Maintaining hydration can reduce the risk of complications. Severe disease can result in hemolytic-uremic syndrome (HUS). Antibiotics and antimotility (antidiarrheal) medicines can increase the risk of HUS in STEC infections.

Careful hand washing with soap and running water is critical to prevent disease and further spread. Hands should be washed after using a toilet or helping to clean others, and before eating or preparing food. Per the CDC “If soap and water aren’t available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. These alcohol-based products can quickly reduce the number of germs on hands in some situations, but they are not a substitute for washing with soap and running water.”

People who attended the event and develop diarrhea, or who have close contact to a case associated with the outbreak, should contact their health care provider for assessment and testing, stay home from school or work, and practice careful hand washing. Health care providers will notify WCHD and we will interview cases and provide more information on how long to stay away from work or school to keep others safe.

We encourage the public to participate in educational and other activities related to agriculture, and we work with our agricultural community partners to improve safety and reduce the risk of future outbreaks.

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