

The Associated Press reports the following today:

ATLANTA -- A salmonella outbreak potentially linked to produce has sickened at least 172 people in 18 states including Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana, health officials said Monday.

Health officials think the bacteria may have spread through some form of produce; the list of suspects includes lettuce and tomatoes.

But the illnesses have not been tied to any specific product, chain, restaurants or supermarkets.

No one has died in the outbreak, which stems from a common form of salmonella bacteria. Eleven people have been hospitalized, health officials said.

"We're very early in the investigation," said Dave Daigle, a spokesman for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Outbreaks of food-borne illness have repeatedly made headlines this year.

Certain brands of packaged spinach, lettuce, carrot juice, beef and unpasteurized milk recently were recalled after they were found to be tainted with illness-causing bacteria.

The most serious outbreak, first reported in September, involved spinach tainted with E. coli bacteria that killed three people and sickened more than 200.

The CDC detected the salmonella outbreak two weeks ago through a national computer lab system that looks for patterns and matches in reports of food-borne illness.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has joined the investigation and will try to help trace the outbreak to its origin.

Most of the cases are in adults, and more than 60 percent are women, said Dr. Chris Braden, a CDC epidemiologist investigating the outbreak.

The states involved are Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia, Vermont and Wisconsin.

Fifty-one cases reported in Massachusetts in September are the same strain as that in the national outbreak, said Donna Rheaume, a spokeswoman for the Department of Public Health.

It was not immediately clear whether those cases were in addition to the 172 reported nationwide.

Salmonella generally cause a nonfatal, diarrhea-causing illness.

Other symptoms can include nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, fever and headache.

There are about 2,500 types of salmonella.

The type in this outbreak -- Salmonella typhimurium -- is one of the most common, Braden said.

People can catch the infection from many different sources, including water, soil, insects, factory surfaces, kitchen surfaces, animal feces, and raw meats, poultry and seafoods.

Health officials estimate that more than 1.4 million cases of salmonellosis occur in the U.S. each

year. About 1.3 million of those cases come from food, Braden said.

In California, where the E. coli outbreak was traced to, a trade group on Monday proposed mandatory state food safety guidelines for lettuce and spinach farmers and processors.

The move by the Western Growers Association would include inspections by state regulators and sanctions for violators.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture, which would be responsible for enforcement, has agreed to work with Western Growers in developing a certification process that would give growers who meet the guidelines a clean bill of health, said Thomas Nassif, the trade group's president.

"It is not normal for a business to say, 'Please regulate us and enforce it if we don't do the right things,'" Nassif said.

"But that, we believe, is essential to restore public confidence."