



To: Local Media

From: Terry Frankovich, M.D., M.P.H., Medical Director

Date: January 12, 2012

Re: E. coli cluster

Western U.P. Health Department is investigating a cluster of **E coli** O157:H7 cases who became ill over the Christmas holidays. Initially 3 local and 2 non-local cases were identified. Investigation has led to the identification of two additional cases. Four of the cases were hospitalized; no deaths have occurred. The health department has determined that the likely source of the outbreak was an ill food-handler at The Ambassador, a Houghton restaurant. The restaurant owner and his staff have been working cooperatively with the health department's Environmental Health division during the investigation. The restaurant remains open for business and there is no anticipated on-going risk of illness due to this outbreak.

“Such an investigation is a routine part of health department operations,” said Dr. Teresa Frankovich, M.D. “The cases came to light earlier this month and health department staff have been conducting interviews with the ill individuals to look for exposures they might have in common. All of the cases have now been linked through the restaurant.”

According to Dr. Frankovich, “Occasional, single cases of E coli diarrhea occur sporadically, but it is unusual to have a cluster of cases at the same time. Public health investigates clusters of disease or illness to make sure that there is no on-going risk of illness and to make sure prevention efforts are in place.”

Symptoms of *E. coli* infection include significant abdominal cramping and diarrhea that progressively worsens and is sometimes bloody. In some people, especially young children, the elderly, or those who are immunocompromised, a more severe illness, even death, is possible. Hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) occurs in about 8% of infections. Persons with this illness have kidney failure and may require dialysis and transfusions.

One of the major sources of *E coli* contamination is ground beef; however, other sources include consumption of unpasteurized milk and juice, sprouts, lettuce, and salami, and contact with cattle. This organism is easily transmitted from person to person. The best prevention against foodborne illness is to wash hands before preparing food and avoid handling food when ill, make sure that food preparation surfaces are clean, cook meats to safe temperatures, wash produce before eating, and drink only pasteurized dairy and cider products,.

The health department asks that anyone who became ill with bloody diarrhea in late December or early January contact the health department at 906-482-7382, Monday through Friday, 8 am-4 pm. Ill individuals should contact their healthcare provider.