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Six People Died from Austrian Listeria Contaminated Cheese

Report Categories:

Dairy and Products

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Report Highlights:

On February 18, Austrian media reported a connection between the consumption of Austrian sour curd cheese (from the company Prolactal) and people sick and dead from listeriosis. The Austrian Health Ministry confirmed twelve Austrian human listeriosis cases in 2009, where people became ill through the consumption of the respective cheese products. Four out of the twelve listeriosis cases died. In addition, Germany reported two people who died from the same cheese source. Further listeriosis cases are under investigation. Due to increased number of listeria bacteria found in its curd cheeses, the company Prolactal had recalled its products by end of January 2010.

General Information:

Summary of Austrian Listeria Contaminated Curd Cheese

On February 18, Austrian media reported the connection between the consumption of in Austria produced sour curd cheese from the company Prolactal and people sick and dead from listeriosis. Ulrich Herzog, the head of the Austrian Health Ministry's Consumer Health Division confirmed twelve Austrian human listeriosis cases in 2009, where people became ill through the consumption of the respective cheese products. Four out of the twelve listeriosis cases died. In addition, Germany reported two people who died from the same cheese source. Further listeriosis cases are under investigation. Up to the current week, the origin of contamination could not be traced. Only the buying habits of sick consumers and the comparison of bacterial strains of sick people and the cheese products led to the connection. Due to increased number of listeria bacteria found in its curd cheeses, the company Prolactal had recalled its products by end of January 2010.

Products with Listeria (*Listeria monocytogenes*) Contamination

The listeria contaminated curd cheese products from Prolactal are sold under various brand names. In Austria the cheese is mainly marketed as "Hartberger Bauernquargel", "Steirischer Quargel" or "Fastenkaese". The brand names in Germany include "Harzer Kaese" and "Bauernkaese mit Edelschimmel", and in the Czech Republic the cheese is marketed as „Banovecke Syrceky“. The company Prolactal as well as the Austrian Health Ministry stress that the products have been checked according to the regulations and tests in the past did not show listeria content above the threshold. Only when they found increased number of listeria the company recalled the products on January 23, 2010 through the EU Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed. The products were taken from retail shelves and consumers have been informed to not eat this product and to return the cheese to the stores where they bought it. At that time the Austrian Health Ministry did not announce a risk to consumers, but advised against consumption. Currently, no such products should be on the market. In total, about 50,000 MT of suspect cheese form Prolactal was withdrawn from the market. Reportedly, the base curd cheese that has been processed at Prolactal in Austria came from Germany.

Details on the concerning cheese products and the company Prolactal can be found at:
<http://www.prolactal.com/en/product-range/sour-milk-cheese/>

European food recalls can be found at the EU Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed database:
http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/rapidalert/rasff_portal_database_en.htm

Countries of Distribution

The major share of the contaminated cheese was distributed in Austria through various food retail chains (Spar and REWE group). Further, it was shipped to Germany (retail chain: Lidl), Czech Republic (retail chain: Lidl), Slovakia, and Poland. None of the product was exported to the United States.

Affected People

In 2009, for twelve human cases of listeriosis in Austria, the Prolactal cheese was proven to be the source for the infection. Four out of the twelve people died from the disease (four men in the age of 57, 61, 84, and 88 years). As of today, at least three additional cases in 2010 are linked to the cheese. The German "Robert-Koch-Institut" in Berlin reported that four human listeriosis cases in Germany are associated with the Austrian cheese. Two Germans died from the contaminated cheese.

Investigation of the Outbreak Source

At the beginning of the listeriosis outbreak in mid 2009, the origin of the contamination was unknown. Investigations of the isolates showed a new listeria strain causing human disease. Because of the increasing number of human infections with that new strain the Austrian Competence Center for Infection-Epidemiology at the Austrian Agency for Health and Food Safety asked recovered patients to report their food consumption habits by delivering their shopping lists. The comparison of these shopping lists showed concurrence in a specific "Quargel"-cheese. Samples of this cheese tested positive for the same bacteria strain as the infected people. This fact could prove the epidemiologic connection between the Prolactal cheese and the listeriosis cases.

Listeriosis

Listeriosis is a bacterial infection caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. Listeriosis occurs primarily in newborn infants, pregnant women, elderly patients, and patients who are immunocompromised. The incubation period for the disease is relatively long (up to 70 days). This is one reason why it is difficult to source the origin. The most common symptoms are influenza-like, fever and muscle aches. The bacterial infection is lethal for almost 30 percent of listeriosis patients.

For more information on this disease check the following link:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Listeriosis>

Prolactal Production Plant and Measures

The Prolactal dairy plant which produced the contaminated cheese products is located in the south-eastern province Styria. The plant is specialized on dry milk and whey products and some special cheese products like the sour curd cheese, "Quargel". The total production quantity in 2007 was at 26,000 MT. Currently the curd cheese production line is stopped to find the source of contamination and resolve the problem.

Hotline for Consumers

In response to the uncertainty of consumers regarding sour curd cheese products, the company Prolactal has established a toll-free hotline under the phone number below. Specific issues will be forwarded to the Clinical Division of Infectious Diseases and Tropical Medicine at the Vienna General Hospital.

Hotline Phone Number (works only in Austria): 0800 – 20 10 80

Question of Guilt

There are rumors that Prolactal and/or the Austrian authorities did not act accurately and in a timely manner. The Austrian prosecution ordered inquiries to investigate possible liabilities.

Claim for Improved Food Inspection

In the occasion of the listeriosis cases, the Austrian Chamber of Labor claims improvements in the food inspection system.

