

Deadly E.Coli Outbreak from Sprouts

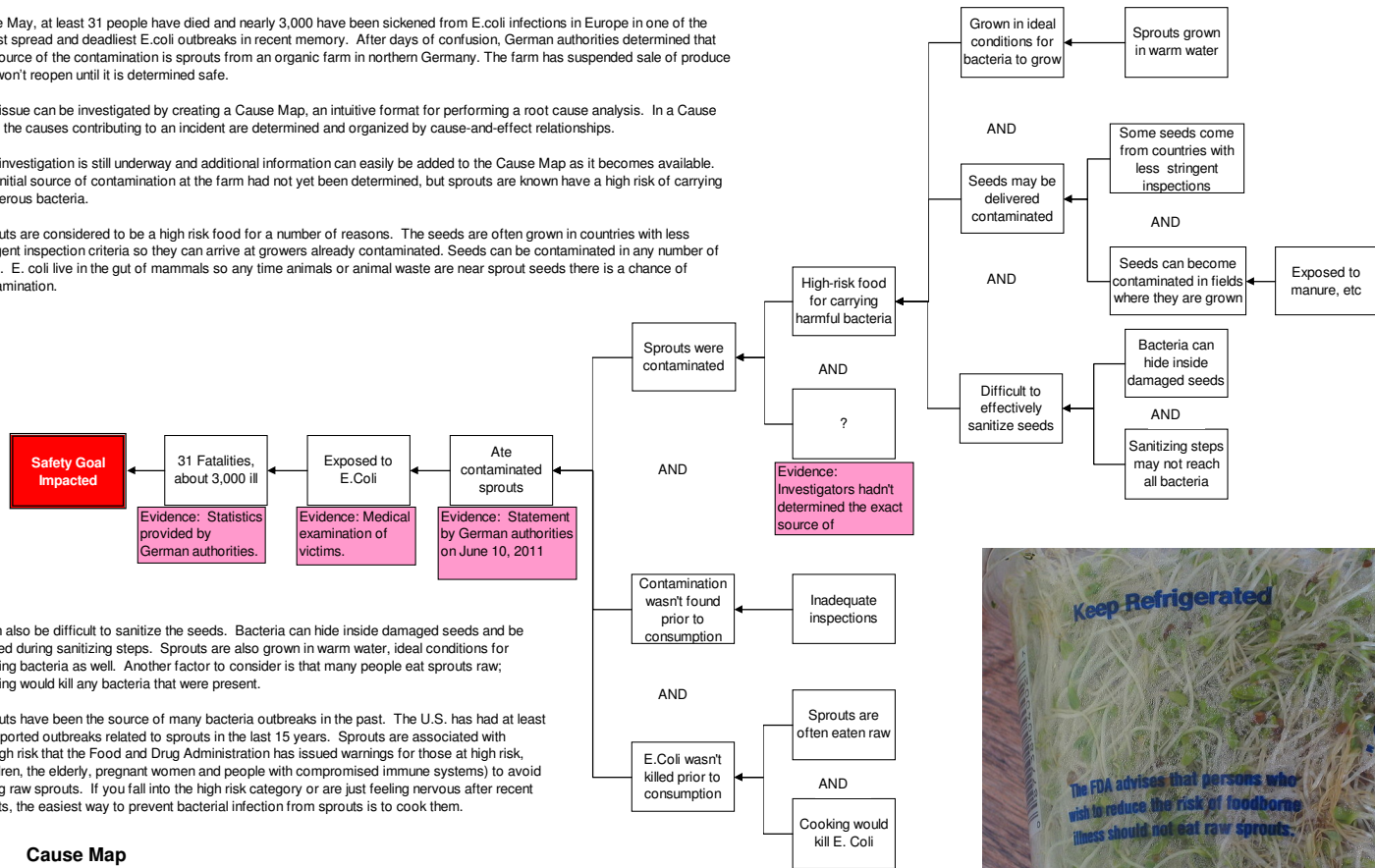
Germany
June 2011

Since May, at least 31 people have died and nearly 3,000 have been sickened from E.coli infections in Europe in one of the widest spread and deadliest E.coli outbreaks in recent memory. After days of confusion, German authorities determined that the source of the contamination is sprouts from an organic farm in northern Germany. The farm has suspended sale of produce and won't reopen until it is determined safe.

This issue can be investigated by creating a Cause Map, an intuitive format for performing a root cause analysis. In a Cause Map, the causes contributing to an incident are determined and organized by cause-and-effect relationships.

This investigation is still underway and additional information can easily be added to the Cause Map as it becomes available. The initial source of contamination at the farm had not yet been determined, but sprouts are known have a high risk of carrying dangerous bacteria.

Sprouts are considered to be a high risk food for a number of reasons. The seeds are often grown in countries with less stringent inspection criteria so they can arrive at growers already contaminated. Seeds can be contaminated in any number of ways. E. coli live in the gut of mammals so any lime animals or animal waste are near sprout seeds there is a chance of contamination.



It can also be difficult to sanitize the seeds. Bacteria can hide inside damaged seeds and be missed during sanitizing steps. Sprouts are also grown in warm water, ideal conditions for growing bacteria as well. Another factor to consider is that many people eat sprouts raw; cooking would kill any bacteria that were present.

Sprouts have been the source of many bacteria outbreaks in the past. The U.S. has had at least 30 reported outbreaks related to sprouts in the last 15 years. Sprouts are associated with enough risk that the Food and Drug Administration has issued warnings for those at high risk, (children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems) to avoid eating raw sprouts. If you fall into the high risk category or are just feeling nervous after recent events, the easiest way to prevent bacterial infection from sprouts is to cook them.



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Cause Map High Level



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