

## Salmonella outbreak linked to watermelons

People are being urged to wash fruit and vegetable as salmonella newport infects 35 people across the UK

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A link between UK cases of salmonella newport and watermelons is being investigated by the Health Protection Agency. Photograph: Pictor International/Alamy

Health watchdogs have reminded people to wash fruit and vegetables, as they investigate whether a salmonella outbreak in which 35 people in the UK are known to have been infected is linked to watermelons.

One person has died, although it is understood they had underlying health complications.

Eastern England has been the area most affected by the outbreak of salmonella newport, the Health Protection Agency (HPA) said. Those with the infection ranged from age six months to 85.

Bob Adak, head of the gastrointestinal diseases department at the HPA, which is investigating 30 cases in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, said: "Although it's too soon to say with certainty what the likely cause of infection is, early indications suggest that a number of people became unwell after eating watermelon. This has also been noted in the cases in Scotland and Germany, although further investigation is ongoing.

"It's important to remember that the risk of becoming unwell after eating watermelon is very low. These cases only represent a very small proportion of total consumption. It is always advisable to wash fruits and vegetables – including watermelon – before consumption to reduce the risk of possible illness."

All of the cases in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were reported in December. Health Protection Scotland said none of the five cases there were reported to have needed hospital treatment and no new cases had been reported since early last month.

Infection with salmonella newport causes a similar illness to other forms of salmonella, with symptoms including diarrhoea, vomiting, abdominal pain and fever.

The HPA said it had identified salmonella newport from a ready-to-eat sliced watermelon imported from Brazil, in a local food survey in north-west England in November 2011. Subsequently, a number of people who became unwell were found to be infected with the same strain identified in the survey.

Ten out of 15 cases followed up by telephone interview reported eating watermelon in the three days prior to the onset of their symptoms, although the agency did not know where their fruit had come from.

An agency spokeswoman said: "Further investigations by the FSA [Food Standards Agency] are ongoing and as soon as any particular producer or distributor of infected watermelons has been identified, steps will be put in place to inform the public and remove any affected items from the food chain."

There were two possible routes of infection. Either the melon surface was contaminated and the bug transferred to flesh during the cutting process or it may have transferred through the cut stem while the melons were stored or washed in contaminated water.

The FSA ,which is involved in the investigations, said it was monitoring the situation and working closely with the food industry, the European commission and other countries. Five cases have been reported in Ireland and 15 in Germany.

In a normal year, about 200 people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are infected with this type of salmonella newport strain. Last year there was a big outbreak in Germany and the Netherlands caused by bean sprouts. Germany also experienced a big E coli outbreak linked to bean sprouts.