

EHEC pathogen not yet typed: tomatoes, cucumbers and salads should nonetheless continue not to be consumed raw

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Although it is not yet clarified whether the pathogen type O104 was found on the cucumbers from Spain, BfR recommends, by way of precaution, to continue not to consume tomatoes, cucumbers and salads raw. This advice, which concerns, more particularly, goods available in Northern Germany, continues to apply as long as the investigations on the outbreak event go on and the source of the outbreak has not been found.

The four samples from the Hamburg-based Institute for Hygiene and Environment (HU) have been sent for final clarification to the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) in Berlin. BfR, in its capacity as National Reference Laboratory, conducts a new typing in order to definitively check whether the pathogens on the cucumbers correspond to the pathogen type of the affected patients (strain O104). After the completion of the typing by the Reference Laboratory of BfR the final result will be established.

As long as the source of the on-going infection has not been identified beyond doubt and closed, consumers are requested to take every precaution. It is not yet clear where the contamination with germs occurred in the food chain – in Germany, during transportation, during packaging or outside Germany. At present BfR cannot safely exclude that beyond the three mentioned types of vegetables, other foods might be the cause for the disease.

The epidemiological results of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) available so far suggest that the most recent infections with EHEC have with a high probability been caused by the consumption of raw tomatoes, cucumbers and salads. Against this backdrop, BfR maintains the consumption recommendations adopted together with RKI and considers them to be necessary for reasons of precautionary health protection.

BfR will adjust its recommendations on consumption as soon as the findings of food tracking and tracing allow a narrowing down of the infection sources or a significant decline in new cases permits the conclusion that the infection source no longer exists.

BfR is of the opinion that the usual hygiene measures, such as washing and peeling, are currently not sufficient for the three suspected vegetables, since already small amounts of germs can trigger an EHEC infection. Although the washing of vegetables reduces the germ count, it does not eliminate the pathogen in a safe manner. Through hand contact during peeling there is a risk of spreading the germ in the kitchen. EHEC is only safely killed if vegetables are heated.