

Germany hunts source of deadly E. coli

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Germany said Sunday it was pulling out all the stops to locate the exact source of an outbreak of E. coli bacteria poisoning blamed for 10 deaths, which authorities suspect may have originated in Spain.

"Until experts in Germany and Spain are able to positively identify the source of the pathogen, general warnings about vegetables remain valid," Consumer Affairs Minister Ilse Aigner told the Bild am Sonntag newspaper.

"The relevant authorities are doing all they can to clear this up, nationally and internationally."

The European Commission said on Friday that organic [cucumbers](#) from southern Spain have been confirmed as a source of the outbreak of enterohaemorrhagic E. coli (EHEC) poisoning.

Germany's national disease institute, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), has said two deaths were from haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS), a disease caused by EHEC that can lead to [bloody diarrhoea](#) and serious [liver damage](#).

But there are eight other suspected HUS deaths, and the RKI has said that close to 300 people have contracted the disease in recent weeks. Normally about 60 people in Germany a year contract HUS.

Spanish authorities said Saturday they had introduced restrictions on two distributors. Andalusia's regional council said suspect batches had been

withdrawn pending tests, results of which were due on Monday.

But the European Commission said a batch of cucumbers originating either in The Netherlands or in Denmark, and traded in Germany, was also under investigation.

The deaths included four fatalities announced on Saturday in the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein and in Hamburg, including three women in their 80s and a fourth in her 30s. Nine of those who have died so far are women.

The [epicentre](#) of the outbreak has been in northern Germany, with more than 1,000 people suspected of being infected, reports said. Several are said to be fighting for their lives.

Hospitals in the city of Hamburg, where more than 400 people are believed to have been infected with EHEC, were said to be overwhelmed and sending patients to clinics elsewhere.

In nearby Luebeck, a spokesman for the university hospital, where some 20 suspected HUS cases were being treated and where one patient has died, told AFP that staff were "close to exhaustion."

Sweden has reported 25 E. coli cases, of whom 10 developed HUS, according to the European Commission. Denmark reported seven E. coli cases (including three HUS) while Britain counted three cases (two HUS).

More cases have been reported in France, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria, where authorities ordered organic cucumbers, tomatoes and aubergines delivered from Germany but grown in Spain withdrawn in 33 shops.

Denmark's veterinary and food products agency said Friday it had found contaminated cucumbers from Spain in the stocks of two wholesalers in the west of the country and ordered them withdrawn.

The Czech Republic has imported a batch of tainted organic cucumbers from Spain, the CTK news agency said Saturday, citing the country's agriculture and food inspection authority SZPI.

The Stockholm-based European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) said Friday that all of these cases involved people who had recently been in northern Germany.

The RKI said last week that a study conducted with the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) had shown that those affected had eaten significantly above-average amounts of tomatoes, lettuce and cucumbers.

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