

**Outbreak of Gastroenteritis Associated with Pichler's Chicken Annie's Restaurant -
Crawford County, May 2009**



Background

On May 15, 2009, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment Office of Surveillance and Epidemiology (KDHE-OSE) was notified of a possible outbreak of gastrointestinal illness among individuals who ate a meal from Pichler's Chicken Annie's, 1271 S 220 Street, Pittsburg, KS 66762. The initial complaint indicated that three out of six people became ill after eating food from Pichler's Chicken Annie's. In response to this complaint, an outbreak investigation was initiated by staff from KDHE-OSE, the Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA), Crawford County Health Department (CCHD) and the Cherokee County Health Department.

Key Findings

Telephone interviews conducted by staff from CCHD revealed that the individuals had consumed take out food from Pichler's Chicken Annie's restaurant on Sunday, May 10, 2009. During the interviews, CCHD staff discovered that a second group had also become ill after eating food from the same restaurant on the same day. All complainants were residents of Cherokee County. A total of 10 individuals were interviewed in association with this outbreak: seven from Group 1 and three from Group 2. The case definition of illness for these two groups was onset of vomiting and either diarrhea (three or more loose stools within a 24-hour period) or nausea after eating food from the Pichler's Chicken Annie's restaurant. Five individuals from Group 1 and one individual from Group 2 met the case definition. The incubation period ranged from 26 – 48 hours and the duration of illness ranged from 12 to 72 hours for the six individuals.

Food histories were collected for the ten individuals; however, no food item was determined to be significantly associated with illness. No other common meals or shared activities were identified. Four stool specimens (three from Group 1 and one from Group 2) were submitted for testing, and all tested positive for norovirus. The specimens were negative for *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, *Campylobacter*, and *E. coli* O157, shiga toxin, and parasites.

A food inspector from KDA inspected the establishment on May 15th. Seven critical violations were noted on the inspection: (1) the inspector found whole pieces of bread drying in storage area to be made into bread crumbs for chicken that were missing middle in some places and missing chunks on side in other places¹; (2) raw chicken was stored over ready-to-eat spaghetti sauce in a walk-in cooler; (3) the chicken breast was cooked to 155°F (this was corrected on site and put back in the fryer until an internal temperature of 188°F was reached); (4) the potato salad was found to have a temperature of 62°F and the date and time markings were incorrect; (5) cottage cheese was found to be at 54°F (this was corrected on site) and raw chicken was found at 52°F (chicken was cooked immediately to proper temperature); (6) commercially processed ham and pasta salad in the reach-in cooler had no date markings to indicate when it was made; and (7) an open bait station for mice was found in the back storage area. All critical violations were corrected at the time of inspection. Two additional violations observed were improper

¹ Per the inspector, the bread could have been in contact with vermin or torn prior to the drying process.

cooling of a potentially hazardous food and improper food storage to protect the food from becoming contaminated with dust, dirty or any pest. No bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food items was observed during this inspection.

To identify illness among restaurant employees, all employees were asked to complete a gastrointestinal illness employee survey. None of the employees reported illness during the specified time frame of May 7 – May 13, 2009. One employee reportedly was aware of others who had symptoms similar to those experienced by the complainants. Further investigation revealed that this employee was also aware of a daycare where children supposedly had experienced gastrointestinal illness. Fortunately, this employee did not work during the time frame of concern.

The facility was re-inspected on May 28th. Six critical violations were noted on the re-inspection which included the following: (1) an open drink cup was found on the prep counter in the kitchen; (2) an employee had bare hand contact with a ready-to-eat food item; (3) spaghetti on the steam table was found to be at 104°F; (4) raw chicken and cottage cheese were found out of temperature; (5) potato salad that was dated as made on 05/21/09 was held longer than 7 days; and (6) cleaner was stored facing and above single service lids and paper towels. All critical violations were corrected at the time of the inspection.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Six individuals from five different households became ill with vomiting and diarrhea or nausea after eating a meal from the Pichler's Chicken Annie's restaurant. Four stool specimens (three from Group 1 and one from Group 2) were tested, and all specimens tested positive for norovirus.

Norovirus is a highly contagious pathogen that requires as few as 10 organisms to cause infection, and shedding of the virus has shown to occur prior to the onset of symptoms¹. Transmitted primarily through the fecal-oral route, norovirus particles may be spread through direct contact or through consuming fecally-contaminated food or water. Spread via aerosolized vomitus is also possible. Historically, norovirus outbreaks have been associated with fecally-contaminated foods, especially ready-to-eat foods such as salads, sandwiches, ice, cookies, and fruit². Humans are the only known reservoir of norovirus. Special care should be taken to avoid norovirus contamination of ready-to-eat foods. Food handlers should be educated on proper hand washing and discouraged from bare hand contact with such foods. Ill food handlers should be excluded from work while experiencing gastrointestinal symptoms.

To be successful in the future, complete and accurate food histories must be obtained, including the time the food items were consumed. Every attempt should also be made to interview well meal companions as this is a way to identify the implicated food items. Individuals who are experiencing gastrointestinal illness should refrain from food handling and ensure proper hand hygiene at all times.

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As the state's environmental protection and public health agency, KDHE promotes responsible choices to protect the health and environment for all Kansans.

Through education, direct services, and the assessment of data and trends, coupled with policy development and enforcement, KDHE will improve health and quality of life. We prevent injuries, illness, and foster a safe and sustainable environment for the people of Kansas.

References:

1 Goller JL, Dimitriadis A, Tan A, Kelly H, Marshall JA. 2004. J. Hosp. Infect. 58(4):286-91.

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Diagnosis and Management of Foodborne Illnesses: A Primer for Physicians and other Health Care Professionals." MMWR 2004;53(No. RR-4).