

Ben Outten
16 October 2023

Salad Bar Salmonella Report

In September-October 1984, a large outbreak of salmonella occurred in the state of Oregon.¹ Despite the original belief that the outbreak was caused by poor food handling, it was later determined that the exposure was intentional, caused by members of a religious cult.¹ While this event occurred nearly 40 years ago, there is no reason why it couldn't happen again today. However, it would be hard to imagine that it would happen on the same scale, given that 751 individuals were infected.¹ According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there have been only three salmonella outbreaks linked to food in the United States in 2023.² In all three outbreaks combined, there have been 58 cases, 14 hospitalizations, and zero deaths.² Therefore, while it could occur again today, it seems unlikely given the incidence of cases. If this incident was originally considered an act of terrorism rather than a food borne outbreak, it would have been treated differently. There would have been a lot more agencies involved in investigating the outbreak, and the narrative driven by the media would have been drastically different.

Based on the executive order related to the surge in respiratory infections issued by the Oregon Governor in 2022, it seems justified to designate the salmonella outbreak as a public health disaster. Oregon extended the state of emergency because cases of RSV, Influenza, and COVID-19 were above normal rates, indicating a change in incidence.³ Therefore, if the criteria for declaring a public health disaster is a sharp increase in incidence, the salmonella outbreak in 1984 would qualify. As for coordination, each agency would have their own job in investigating the outbreak. On the public health side, they would have the role of investigating cases, and trying to figure out how to mitigate potential future cases. Once the outbreak is determined to be intentional, law enforcement would have the job of finding those who intentionally spread the illness. According to the FDA, salmonellosis is the second leading cause of food borne illness in the U.S., but the leading cause of hospitalizations and deaths.⁴ Therefore, my main concern would be decreasing the amount of cases. This is because the higher number of cases, the higher chance there is of hospitalizations and death, which public health workers intend to prevent.

References

1. Török TJ, Tauxe RV, Wise RP, et al. A large community outbreak of salmonellosis caused by intentional contamination of restaurant salad bars. *JAMA*. 1997;278(5):389-395. doi:10.1001/jama.1997.03550050051033
2. Outbreaks involving salmonella | CDC. CDC.gov. <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/outbreaks.html>.
3. *Executive Order 22-24, Expanding declaration of emergency due to surge in respiratory infections in Oregon; repealing and replacing Executive Order 22-23*, Office of the Governor, State of Oregon, December 7, 2022
4. Get the Facts About Salmonella. FDA.gov. <https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/animal-health-literacy/get-facts-about-salmonella#:~:text=The%20Centers%20for%20Disease%20Control,26%2C500%20hospitalizations%20and%20420%20deaths>.