

Salad Bar Salmonella Report

The Salad Bar Salmonella outbreak could still happen today through intentional or unintentional means. The outbreak that took place in 1984 was an intentional contamination from members of a religious commune.¹ If a any group decided to contaminate a chain of restaurants in response to a religious or political goal, there is opportunity to do so, since it is relatively inexpensive to get the bacteria and it does not need much equipment or skills.¹

If this outbreak was treated as an act of terrorism rather than a food-borne outbreak, the management of the case would be slightly different. The interviews of employees and people that had gotten sick would still happen but there would be a greater sense of urgency due to the fear of the attack spreading in more areas. There was also press that encouraged patients to report their disease, but this would be more mandatory than required if terrorism was suspected.¹ The investigation also did not include interviews with people who ate at the restaurant but only with employees or people who got sick. The contamination could have started with someone who just came to eat, so if terrorism was suspected, more people would have been interviewed. The restaurants would also be more likely be required to shut down rather than just closing the salad bar, and specific officials that deal with terrorism would have been involved sooner. Disaster plans for food-borne outbreaks and terrorism are slightly different in regard to leaders of investigation and the order of officials involved.

The outbreak does merit the designation of a “public health disaster” because there was an emergency/disaster that impacted a community in a way that is not common. Intentional contamination of food from a group to win a political election is a public health disaster, since it encompasses terrorism that led to a health outbreak.

The coordination between public health and law enforcement was not as well established as it should have been, since it took over a year to realize that there was a connection to the religious commune.¹ Public health officials were looking more towards food-borne contamination, and law enforcement only had an investigation on employees when they could have conducted a separate investigation focusing on intentional contamination.

As a public health professional, once the outbreak began, I would have been concerned about the number of people being affected, the source of the outbreak, and how to stop the number of cases from rising. I would be focused on stopping the outbreak first and making sure that more people and restaurants were not affected. I would be able to do this through following a disaster preparedness plan and local collaborations. After the cases are controlled, I would be concerned about whether this outbreak was unintentional or intentional and would get assistance from law enforcement as soon as possible.

Srija Gogineni
10/15/23

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