

Monday, 2 November 2009

HEALTH WARNING CONTINUES ON SEMI-DRIED TOMATOES

Health authorities in Victoria have renewed their advice that people buying loose semi-dried tomatoes should not eat them unless they are thoroughly cooked.

The advice follows the notification of a further 23 Victorians diagnosed with hepatitis A in the past week and the completion today of the preliminary analysis of a case control study into a recent increase of cases.

Victoria's Chief Health Officer Dr John Carnie said that so far this year there had been 200 notifications of hepatitis A. This compares with 74 cases to the same time last year.

"The food history evidence indicates that over two thirds of the latest cases recall eating semi-dried tomatoes," Dr Carnie said.

"And the preliminary results of the case control study of 50 of the notified cases reported to us over the past few months supports this strong association between illness and consumption of semi-dried tomatoes.

"Because the incubation period for hepatitis A could be as long as two months, trying to get people who fell ill to accurately pin down what and where they actually ate this product can be difficult.

"We still are unclear as to why there has been a recent spike in cases in Victoria. However, we are continuing to work with the manufacturers and suppliers of semi-dried tomatoes to try and identify the source.

"The department has been given an undertaking by all local producers that they have instituted steps to reduce the risk from hepatitis A virus in their products.

"We have also been in contact with importers of these products to ensure that they have appropriate quality control measures in place to minimise transmission of the virus," Dr Carnie said.

Semi-dried tomatoes are widely available in supermarkets, independent delis and cafes throughout Victoria. They are also used by restaurants and cafes in many foods, including salads and sandwiches.

"The outbreak seems to be confined mainly to Victoria which appears to rule out produce sold through major supermarket chains which is distributed nationwide.

"Bottled semi-dried tomatoes available at supermarkets are pasteurised and have not been implicated in this outbreak," Dr Carnie said.

"People who may have semi-dried tomatoes at home and are unsure of where they were bought should not eat them unless they are thoroughly cooked - such as in pizza and quiche. Restaurants and cafes should also follow this advice."

Hepatitis A is spread when traces of faecal matter containing the virus contaminates hands, objects, water or food and is then taken in by mouth.

Symptoms of hepatitis A include abdominal pain, nausea, fever and chills and jaundice. Anyone experiencing these symptoms should contact their GP or *Nurse On Call* on 1300 60 60 24.

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