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FDA Investigated Listeria monocytogenes Illnesses Linked to Caramel Apples

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Update

August 21, 2015

After a U.S. Food and Drug Administration review, the agency considers the **January 9, 2015** recall of Gala and Granny Smith apples supplied by Bidart Bros. to be complete.

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) along with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state and local authorities investigated a listeriosis outbreak linked to commercially-produced, prepackaged

whole caramel apples. Listeriosis is caused by the bacterium Listeria monocytogenes. According to the CDC, the outbreak appeared to be over as of February 12, 2015.

What was the Problem and What was Done?

The FDA, CDC and state and local officials investigated an outbreak of listeriosis linked to commercially-produced, prepackaged whole caramel apples.

[According to the CDC](#), 35 people from 12 states were infected with the outbreak strains of *Listeria monocytogenes*. The CDC reports that 34 ill people were hospitalized. Listeriosis contributed to at least three of the seven deaths that were reported. Eleven illnesses were pregnancy-related, with one illness resulting in a fetal loss. Illness onset dates ranged from October 17, 2014 to January 6, 2015.

The CDC reports that 28 of the 31 ill people interviewed reported eating commercially-produced, prepackaged whole caramel apples. To date, caramel apple brands named in interviews include Happy Apple, Carnival and Merb's Candies.

On December 18, 2014, the [Minnesota Department of Health](#) reported four illnesses. The Minnesota cases purchased caramel apples from Cub Foods, Kwik Trip, and Mike's Discount Foods, which carried Carnival brand and Kitchen Cravings brand caramel apples. These two brands are no longer available for purchase at retail locations.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has identified [two cases of listeriosis in Canada](#) with the same DNA fingerprints, or pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) patterns, as seen in the US outbreak. PHAC is working with its provincial and territorial partners to determine the source of these illnesses. Since the investigation began, more detailed testing on the two Canadian cases has been completed, concluding that only a single case in Manitoba is genetically related to the U.S. outbreak of listeriosis.

Three companies have issued voluntary recalls of caramel apples because they have the potential to be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. These companies are:

- Happy Apple Company of Washington, Missouri
- California Snack Foods, of South El Monte, California
- Merb's Candies of St. Louis, Missouri

Each company reported receiving notice from Bidart Bros., an apple supplier headquartered in Bakersfield, California, that there may be a connection between the listeriosis outbreak and the apples supplied to them by Bidart Bros.

Investigating agencies worked to trace the origin of the caramel apples eaten by 11 ill

people involved in the outbreak. Although the manufacturers of the brands reported by these cases (including Happy Apple Company and Merb's Candies) received apples from other growers, the traceback investigation confirmed that Bidart Bros. is the only apple grower that supplied apples to each company.

On December 22, 2014, the FDA and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) briefed Bidart Bros. on the status of the investigation.

On December 22, 2014, Bidart Bros. issued a recall of Granny Smith apples it sold in 2014 to those customers known to produce caramel apples. Then, on December 24, 2014, Bidart Bros. notified all customers receiving Granny Smith apples in 2014 to recall those apples if they had been used to make caramel apples.

On December 23, 2014, FDA and CDPH activated the California Food Emergency Response Team (CalFERT), a team comprised of CDPH and FDA specialists who rapidly respond to food emergencies in California. CalFERT conducted a joint investigation of the firm. The team took environmental samples, swabbing surfaces likely to come into contact with apples. Analyses of the samples revealed that several of these samples contained *Listeria monocytogenes*. CalFERT shared these laboratory results with Bidart Bros. on January 5, 2015.

On January 6, 2015, Bidart Bros. sent letters to its distributors, expanding its voluntary recall. Bidart Bros. is recalling all Granny Smith and Gala apples shipped from the company's Shafter, California packing facility in 2014.

On January 8, 2015, pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) analysis of the *Listeria monocytogenes* isolated from environmental samples collected at Bidart Bros. confirmed that the PFGE patterns, or DNA fingerprints, of the pathogen matched the outbreak strains of *Listeria monocytogenes* isolated from people affected by the outbreak. *Listeria monocytogenes* matching the outbreak strains, by PFGE type, also was isolated from samples of Bidart Bros. whole apples collected along the distribution chain by FDA and state investigators in December 2014.

On January 9, 2015, Bidart Bros. issued a [news release announcing the recall](#) and reporting that December 2, 2014, was the last shipment date for the company's apples.

Other varieties of apples and apples from other growers are not affected by the recall.

On January 18, 2015, whole genome sequence (WGS) analysis of the *Listeria monocytogenes* isolated from environmental samples collected at Bidart Bros. confirmed that the genomes of the pathogens were highly related to the outbreak strains of *Listeria monocytogenes* isolated from people affected by the outbreak. Highly related *Listeria monocytogenes* strains were also isolated from samples of Bidart Bros. whole apples collected along the distribution chain by FDA and state investigators in December 2014.

According to the CDC, the outbreak appears to be over as of February 12, 2015.

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What are the Symptoms of Listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a rare but serious illness caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium called *Listeria monocytogenes*. Anyone who experiences fever and muscle aches, sometimes preceded by diarrhea or other gastrointestinal symptoms, or develops fever and chills after eating commercially-produced, prepackaged caramel apples should seek medical care and tell the health care provider about any history of eating those caramel apples. Symptoms can appear from a few days up to a few weeks after consumption of the contaminated food.

Who is at Risk?

Listeriosis can be fatal, especially in certain high-risk groups. These groups include the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems and certain chronic medical conditions (such as cancer). In pregnant women, listeriosis can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, premature labor, and serious illness or death in newborn babies.

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What Specific Products were recalled?

On December 24, 2014, the Happy Apple Company of Washington, Missouri, issued a [voluntary recall of Happy Apple Brand caramel apples](#) with a best use by date between August 25th and November 23rd 2014, because they have the potential to be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

Happy Apple caramel apples are sold in single pack, three packs, four packs and eight packs and each package will have a best use by date on the front of the label. They were available for retail sale through grocery, discount and club stores, generally in the produce section and were distributed to retailers in the following states: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin.

Also, on December 24, 2014, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) announced the [recall in Canada of Happy Apple brand caramel apples](#) due to possible *Listeria monocytogenes* contamination.

On December 31, 2014, the [Happy Apple Company expanded this recall](#) to include Kroger Brand caramel apples produced by the Happy Apple Company with a best use by date between September 15th and November 18th 2014 because they have the

potential to be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

Kroger brand caramel apples produced by Happy Apple are sold in single packs and three packs. Each package will have a best use by date on the front of the label. Some caramel apples sold under the Kroger brand are labeled as candy apples and some are labeled as caramel apples. The apples were distributed to retailers in the following states: Arizona, Alaska, Kansas, Idaho, Louisiana, Montana, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

On December 27, 2014, California Snack Foods, of El Monte, California, issued a [voluntary recall of California Snack Foods Karm'l Dapple brand caramel apples](#) with a best use by date between August 15th and November 28th, 2014, because they have the potential to be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

California Snack Foods caramel apples are sold in single packs and three packs and each package will have a best use by date on the front of the label. They were available for retail sale through grocery, discount and club stores, generally in the produce section and were distributed to retailers in the following states: Arizona, California, Nevada, Texas and Utah.

On December 29, 2014, Merb's Candies of St. Louis, Missouri, issued a [voluntary recall of the Merb's Candies brand Bionic Apples and Double Dipped Apples](#) because they have the potential to be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

Bionic Apples and Double Dipped Apples were available for retail sales at St. Louis area locations, through local supermarkets (located in the produce section) and through mail orders nationwide. The product is individually packaged in a clear, burgundy and gold cellophane bag and would have been available from September 8th through November 25th 2014 – no identifying lot codes were used.

The recalling companies report that the recalled caramel apples should no longer be available for purchase in stores.

On January 6, 2015, Bidart Bros. of Bakersfield, California issued a voluntary recall of all Gala and Granny Smith apples shipped from its Shafter, California packing facility in 2014.

On January 7, 2015, the [CFIA announced the recall](#) in Canada of Granny Smith apples and Gala apples from Bidart Bros due to possible *Listeria monocytogenes* contamination. According to CFIA, Bidart Apples are sold under the brand names "Big B" and "Granny's Best."

What Do Consumers Need To Do?

After a U.S. Food and Drug Administration review the agency considers that the January 9, 2015 recall of Gala and Granny Smith apples supplied by Bidart Bros. to

be complete.

Recommendations for preventing listeriosis are available at the CDC *Listeria* website: <http://www.cdc.gov/listeria/prevention.html>.

Listeria monocytogenes can grow at refrigerator temperatures, as low as 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius). The longer ready-to-eat refrigerated foods are stored in the refrigerator, the more opportunity *Listeria* has to grow.

For refrigerators and other food preparation surfaces and food cutting utensils that may have come in contact with commercially-produced, prepackaged caramel apples, including those containing nuts, sprinkles, chocolate, or other toppings, it is very important that the consumers thoroughly clean the following areas:

- Wash the inside walls and shelves of the refrigerator, cutting boards and countertops; then sanitize them with a solution of one tablespoon of chlorine bleach to one gallon of hot water; dry with a clean cloth or paper towel that has not been previously used.

In addition, consumers can follow these simple steps for food safety:

- Wash hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food.
- Wipe up spills in the refrigerator immediately and clean the refrigerator regularly.
- Always wash hands with warm water and soap following the cleaning and sanitization process.

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What Do Retailers and Restaurants Need To Do?

Retailers and restaurants should work with their suppliers to ensure that they are not selling the Granny Smith and Gala apples being recalled by Bidart Bros., or caramel apples made using the recalled Bidart Bros. apples. This includes caramel apples containing nuts, sprinkles, chocolate, or other toppings.

Restaurants and retailers should also:

- Wash and sanitize display cases and refrigerators where potentially contaminated products were stored.
- Wash and sanitize cutting boards, surfaces, and utensils used to cut, serve, or store potentially contaminated products.
- Wash hands with warm water and soap following the cleaning and sanitation process.
- Retailers, restaurants, and other food service operators who have processed and

packaged any potentially contaminated products need to be concerned about cross contamination of cutting surfaces and utensils through contact with the potentially contaminated products.

- Regular frequent cleaning and sanitizing of cutting boards and utensils used in processing may help to minimize the likelihood of cross-contamination.

Listeria can grow at refrigeration temperatures. *Listeria* can also cross contaminate other food cut and served on the same cutting board or stored in the same area. Retailers, restaurants, and other food service operators may wish to consider whether other foods available for sale could have been cross-contaminated from the potentially contaminated products, and should be discarded.

Who Should be Contacted?

Consumers with questions about the Bidart Bros. recall may contact the company at 661-399-0978.

Consumers with questions about the California Snack Foods recall may contact the company at 800-966-5501 Monday through Friday during normal business hours or via email at info@californiasnackfoods.com.

Consumers with questions about the Happy Apple recall may contact the company at 800-527-7532 Monday through Friday during normal business hours or via email at customercare@happyapples.com.

Consumers with questions about the Merb's Candies recall may contact the firm at customercare.merbscandies@gmail.com or during normal business hours Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. CST at (314) 832-7206.

The FDA encourages consumers with questions about food safety to call 1-888-SAFEFOOD Monday through Friday between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Eastern time, or to consult <http://www.fda.gov>.

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The information in this posting reflects the FDA's best efforts to communicate what it has learned from the manufacturer, the CDC, and the state and local public health and food regulatory agencies involved in the investigation. The agency will update this page as more information becomes available.

For more information:

- [CDC Vital Signs Listeria](#)
- [FoodSafety.gov on Listeria](#)
- [CDC Web Page](#)

- [Minnesota Press Release](#)

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