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Seventh Listeria death linked to Proactal cheese

By Rory Harrington, 25-Feb-2010

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A seventh person has died after eating cheese made by Proactal contaminated with Listeria, Austrian authorities confirmed yesterday.

The 57-year-old man from Lower Austria died at the end of December two days after being admitted to hospital, a spokeswoman from the country's food safety agency, AGES, told FoodProductionDaily.com.

The latest victim is the fifth Austrian fatality, with the other two being German.

The Austrian food safety watchdog said 12 people had been hospitalised since the beginning of the year with illnesses linked to consumption of Proactal's acid curd cheese. Nine of these have already been confirmed as being sickened with the same Listeria strain found in the company's cheeses.

AGES said there were currently a total of 21 Listeria cases connected to the outbreak in Austria.

Investigation

Austrian health authorities said a painstaking investigation involving investigators trawling through old shopping receipts was necessary to establish the link between the cheeses and the listeriosis cases. The agency said Proactal had issued a Europe-wide recall of its cheese on January 23 and that so far all the cases of Listeriosis had been contracted prior to that date.

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Proactal confirmed last week it had halted production at its Hartberg site in Styria. Production will only begin again once the causes have been full clarified. An examination into the causal links between the listeria monocytogenes found in the cheese and the occurrences of illness is still ongoing.

Listeria is a bacterium that can contaminate a range of foodstuffs from plants to meats and dairy products, and cause listeriosis in humans. The Austrian health ministry said the disease, which causes headaches, vomiting, and fever, can be particularly dangerous for the elderly. Around one in four cases result in death.

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