

# The E.coli outbreak in Alberta shows why stringent public health measures matter <sup>[1]</sup>

We need to know if public health regulations regarding food preparation are strong enough. Has the Alberta government cut too much red tape?

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**Source:** Toronto Star

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 19 Sep 2023

## AVAILABILITY

Access online [limited access] <sup>[2]</sup>

## Excerpts

During the early years of the pandemic we all found out the hard way that the monitoring and managing of threats to public health can save lives and reduce suffering.

In Alberta, we are learning that lesson all over again.

This time it's not the elderly who are most at risk but babies, toddlers, and preschoolers who have been hit by a dangerous strain of E.coli that appears to have spread from a central kitchen that supplies food to several Calgary daycare facilities. It's the same strain that infected 2,300 people and killed seven in Walkerton in 2000.

Some of the awful pain and suffering of the children was described in a letter to Premier Danielle Smith signed by 700 parents and supporters: "Many of our children began falling ill at the end of August. Over the following days, many passed not just blood but their own flesh as they screamed in pain, unable to sleep for days while others became lethargic and despondent, all of them struggling to make sense of what was going on."

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Alberta Health Services, which oversees public health matters across the province, has been frantically trying to pin down the exact origin of the infection. Was it undercooked hamburger? Lettuce? Did a kitchen employee unknowingly introduce it?

But there are also larger questions that must be answered if we are to avoid a contagious and potentially deadly infection happening again. We need to know if public health regulations regarding food preparation and the implementation of those regulations are strong enough. Conservative governments like Smith's talk endlessly about "cutting red tape" that they believe hampers businesses. Has it gone too far in Alberta? Do we have enough public health inspectors to get the job done?

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There's also the question of Premier Smith and the United Conservative Party's attitude toward the need for effective public health measures. Smith won the UCP leadership by appealing to people opposed to COVID-19 vaccines, mask mandates and other pandemic precautions.

In November, shortly after she became premier, she said the unvaccinated had suffered the most discrimination she had seen in her lifetime. She then fired Deena Hinshaw, the Chief Medical Officer of Health who had managed the province's response to the pandemic even though she was following directions from the UCP cabinet.

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Does she still believe that public health regulations are an infringement of people's freedoms?

Or has she learned from the E.coli crisis that the health and safety of Albertans relies on effective regulation and implementation of measures that can reduce spread of infection and thereby save lives and reduce suffering.

**Related link:** E. coli outbreak spotlights daycare food safety, experts say <sup>[3]</sup>

Investigation into E. coli outbreak at Calgary and area daycares deepens <sup>[4]</sup>

Alberta premier asks ministers for 'full assessment' of E. coli outbreak in Calgary <sup>[5]</sup>

**Region:** Alberta <sup>[6]</sup>

**Tags:** food <sup>[7]</sup>

health and safety <sup>[8]</sup>

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