# First deaths in US cyclosporiasis outbreak reported in Michigan

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Two residents of Michigan are dead, the first reported fatalities in what has become the largest outbreak of cyclosporiasis ever recorded in the United States. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) announced on Monday, August 3, that both individuals had "significant underlying health conditions that may have been impacted by cyclosporiasis and dehydration." Officials said no further information would be released, including the ages of the deceased, their counties of residence or the dates of death. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had recorded no fatalities nationally through July 27.

The scale is without precedent. MDHHS reported 11,234 cases of the parasitic illness in Michigan since June 22, an 8 percent increase over the previous Thursday's count of 10,386. At least 193 people have been hospitalized and 71 of the state's 83 counties are affected, led by Wayne County with 1,625 cases and Oakland County with 1,043. Daily cases peaked at 726 on July 13 and have since declined. Michigan normally records about 50 cases in an entire year, making the current caseload roughly 225 times the historical baseline. The largest previous outbreak, linked to imported Guatemalan raspberries in 1996, involved 1,465 cases across North America.

This is not an accidental failure of food handling. It is a form of social murder, in which the food monopolies and the capitalist state expose the working class to a preventable hazard whose mechanism of contamination they have understood since 2013.

The systemic character of the crisis is visible in the Food and Drug Administration's own outbreak table. The agency opened six separate *Cyclospora* investigations in 2026. Only one, the iceberg lettuce outbreak traced to Taylor Farms, has an identified food vehicle. The other five, comprising 131 cases, completed traceback without identifying a contaminated food, and three have been closed with the source unknown.

Six weeks in, regulators have not secured a single confirmed positive product sample. The one positive result, announced by the FDA on July 18, was withdrawn the next day after agency laboratory experts concluded it did not represent true amplification. What implicates the lettuce is the traceback convergence on a single supplier and the epidemiology, not the laboratory.

Dr. Teena Chopra, professor of internal medicine in the Division of Infectious Diseases at Wayne State University School of Medicine, explained why a treatable illness turns fatal. The parasite invades the cells lining the small intestine, and the resulting watery diarrhea strips the body of fluids and electrolytes. The elderly, the immunocompromised and those with multiple existing conditions cannot compensate. And in a patient with heart disease, Chopra said, the illness can worsen the underlying condition into fatal complications. Dr. Rebecca Schein of Michigan State University added that prolonged dehydration damages the kidneys. The parasite is a contributing cause of death that rarely reaches the certificate.

Three years ago the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods (NACMCF), a federal body spanning the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce and Defense along with the FDA and CDC, answered 18 questions the FDA had posed about *Cyclospora* in produce.

Confronted with an organism that survives chemical washing, physical processing and the tests meant to find it, the committee's central recommendation was soap. Because human fecal contamination is the only known source, it concluded that prevention must center on sanitation guidelines, on-site handwashing stations with soap and worker training. It proposed no testing requirement, no water standard, no enforcement mechanism and no funding. Three years later, none of it has been implemented.

**Fecal contamination is a condition of employment**

*Cyclospora cayetanensis* infects only humans, and person-to-person transmission is improbable because of the time required for the organism to mature.

The timeline carries political consequences. Contamination in a commercial field is never a momentary lapse of personal hygiene. It is a week or a fortnight during which human feces sat in a growing field or an irrigation source while the crop grew around it.

What that looks like was documented when federal inspectors examined 11 farms and packing houses in Puebla, Mexico, during the cilantro outbreaks of 2012 to 2015, reported by Dr. Florence Abanyie of the CDC and colleagues in *Epidemiology and Infection*. Inspectors found human feces and toilet paper in the growing fields. Sanitary facilities lacked soap, toilet paper, running water and paper towels or were absent altogether. Transport crates and the tables where cilantro was cut were visibly dirty. The water used to wash the cilantro was vulnerable to contamination from sewage and septic systems.

The 2013 assessment documented how symptoms are managed rather than diagnosed. Taylor Farms de Mexico's own harvest crew medical logs show that during the outbreak window four field workers received loperamide, an anti-diarrheal, and that on August 7 two were prescribed trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole, sold as Bactrim, the antibiotic used to treat *cyclosporiasis*. No diagnosis was recorded, and no laboratory test performed. The company physician said he had not

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suspected the parasite and had chosen that lot of antibiotics partly because it was near expiry. Symptoms were medicated and, in two cases, the specific antibiotic for *cyclosporiasis* was dispensed, while the illness itself was never named. The FDA had to recommend that the firm begin encouraging symptomatic workers to submit stool samples.

Epidemiology stops at the border of this exploitation. The NACMCF report noted that surveying agricultural laborers in the United States would require resolving ethical and legal obstacles. The class reality behind the euphemism is that a largely undocumented workforce cannot be enrolled in state surveillance without exposure to deportation.

**A disease pathway built by capital**

Human infection with *Cyclospora* was first described in scientific literature in 1979. What the modern food system produced is not the organism but the route and the exposed population: a supply chain engineered to move raw, uncooked produce year-round from regions where the parasite is endemic to supermarkets and restaurant franchises in the imperialist centers.

In endemic countries, repeated exposure from childhood builds immunological tolerance, and infected adults are frequently asymptomatic. In Michigan, the population has no acquired immunity, so nearly everyone who ingests the oocysts falls ill.

The vehicles are exclusively the categories the fresh-cut industry spent three decades expanding. No food other than raw fresh produce has ever been associated with this parasite. Of the 154 outbreaks recorded in the National Outbreak Reporting System between 1971 and 2021, not one involved food processed beyond cutting and bagging. Centralizing preparation in high-volume cutting facilities converted a localized hazard into a mass one.

The global dimensions are only now being measured. On June 4 the World Health Organization published estimates covering 42 foodborne hazards across 194 countries. Unsafe food causes about 866 million illnesses and 1.5 million deaths a year and costs some $310 billion in lost productivity in 2021. Children under five, 9 percent of the world's population, suffer nearly one-third of all cases. Africa and Southeast Asia account for nearly three-quarters of illnesses.

In the companion study of 14 diarrheal hazards, *Cyclospora cayetanensis* entered the global accounts for the first time, with an estimated 10.2 million foodborne illnesses and 14,600 deaths a year. Foodborne transmission accounts for 76.9 percent of its burden, the highest proportion of any hazard assessed.

Yuki Minato, the WHO technical officer for food safety and senior author of the *Lancet Global Health* paper, called the findings a wake-up call, warning that foodborne disease is being worsened by climate change and antimicrobial resistance and that governments must invest in surveillance. "Delay costs lives," Minato said.

The appeal, like the studies beneath it, is addressed to governments in the abstract. This is the boundary at which the academic and public health institutions of capitalist society invariably stop. They count the illnesses with great precision, price the lost productivity to the nearest billion, name the remedy and then fall silent. They do not ask who profits from the conditions they have just described, or why a remedy known for decades and costing very little has gone unfunded in country after country. The burden is presented as a natural fact to be measured rather than a social product to be abolished, and the economic order that manufactures it, year after year, is never named.

**The remedy is known and withheld**

Washington has not stood still. On July 1, 2025, the CDC's Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network made *Cyclospora* tracking optional, requiring states to monitor only two pathogens. Michigan continued voluntarily, which is much of why it appears to be the epicenter. The Government Accountability Office reported in February 2025 that the FDA had 432 investigators for roughly 200,000 food facilities. The traceability rule mandated in 2011 has been delayed to July 2028.

None of this is a problem of science. The 2013 assessment named the step at which contamination multiplies. The 2023 committee named the measures that would prevent it: sanitation guidelines, handwashing stations with soap, workers who can afford to stay home when sick, and water treatment designed for parasites rather than bacteria. Each is available today. Each is withheld because sanitation is a cost, and the profitability of the bagged-salad model is primary.

Two people in Michigan are dead of an illness a federal committee said could be prevented with soap and running water. More than 11,000 have been sickened, and the source has still not been named. The scientists who might have named it were laid off. The parasite will return next summer, because the conditions that produce it are the conditions of profit.

Food safety cannot be secured by agencies being defunded, by companies that audit themselves, or by consumers washing lettuce at the sink. It requires that the agribusiness and food processing monopolies be taken out of private hands and placed under the democratic control of the workers who grow, cut, pack and serve the food, as part of the reorganization of the world economy to meet human needs. That requires the political independence of the working class from both parties of American capitalism and the building of rank-and-file committees in the fields, plants and restaurants.

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