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## **Salmonellosis outbreak traced to pepper spices; break came in testing at a Portland restaurant**

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Public health officials in Oregon and three other western states have tracked a multi-state outbreak of salmonellosis to ground pepper imported, packaged and distributed by a California company.

Union International Food Co. of Union City, Calif., immediately announced a voluntary recall of ground black pepper and white pepper as well as a number of other products that could have been cross-contaminated in its manufacturing facility.

Dr. William Keene, a senior epidemiologist in the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division, said restaurant and store managers, restaurant suppliers and spice wholesalers are being asked to check their inventories and remove recalled products immediately. The contaminated pepper was packaged under the "Lian How" and "Uncle Chen" labels and sold to restaurant suppliers and markets – much of it going to Chinese and Vietnamese establishments.

Since December, 42 rare Salmonella Rissen infections have been reported in Oregon, California, Washington and Nevada. Public health officials in those states pooled their resources to identify the source. People were hospitalized in eight of the 42 cases; no deaths have been reported. Oregon had four of the cases, all in metropolitan Portland, a number equal to the average annual number usually reported for the nation.

Keene said the mystery was difficult to solve. "Most people don't have a great recollection of what kinds of spices they may have eaten, much less the brands – especially for food that they did not themselves cook," he said.

“We were making very little progress with our usual interview approach,” Keene said, “and finally we just started testing a variety of products of interest. Last week we hit the jackpot – positive cultures from Lian How brand ground pepper samples. The isolates were confirmed to match the outbreak strain. Public health investigators in Nevada and California were able to quickly confirm that the same brand of white and black pepper was used in several restaurants named by cases infected in those states. Nevada health authorities today reported finding Salmonella in Lian How-brand pepper at a Reno restaurant that several infected people had visited.”

Keene said the investigation is continuing to better understand how the contaminated products were distributed, including whether any of the spices were sold directly to retail consumers.

Salmonella infections cause diarrhea, fever, abdominal cramping and sometimes vomiting. Symptoms typically last less than a week, although infants, the elderly and those with immunodeficiencies are at increased risk for severe illness. Antibiotic treatment is of no value for most patients.

Details about the Lian How and Uncle Chen products are on the company’s Web site: [www.ufunionfood.com](http://www.ufunionfood.com).

- The Lian How products were packaged in containers of various sizes: 10- and 15-pound cardboard boxes with plastic liners that are tied closed; 4- and 5-pound clear semi-hard plastic wide-mouth jars; 5-pound plastic bags and 2.2-pound foil bags.
- Following the Lian How brand name, the words “Packaged by Union International Foods” or only “Union International Foods” appear.
- The following products are included in the company’s recall: White pepper, black pepper, cayenne pepper, paprika, chopped onion, onion powder, garlic (chopped, minced, powder and granulated); whole white pepper, whole black pepper, curry powder, mustard powder and wasabi powder.
- Uncle Chen brand white and black pepper is sold in 5-ounce plastic jars.