

**PHOENIX**

# As E. coli outbreak spread, Arizona officials didn't notify the public

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**Key Points** AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Multiple children were hospitalized with life-threatening conditions after visiting the Arizona State Fair's petting zoo.

Officials justify withholding information by stating there is no longer an ongoing public risk.

Health advocates argue that not identifying potential sources prevents the public from taking precautions and can delay medical treatment.

State health officials kept key details of an [E. coli outbreak tied to the Arizona State Fair](#) from the public even as multiple children were rushed to emergency rooms with life-threatening conditions.

As the number of cases climbed in October and November, the Arizona Department of Health Services did not disclose potential sources, the number of cases, the geographic spread or any potential connections.

With no new cases emerging in at least two weeks, officials cite the lack of an "ongoing risk" to justify continued withholding of information about what happened or how the infection was spread. Public messaging, officials said, is reserved for exposures where the public can take clear action.

"ADHS does not release the names of suspected modes of transmission unless there is confirmed evidence of a continuing public exposure risk," JP Martin, the

department's media director said in a Dec. 2 email. "We make decisions about public notification based on verified evidence and ongoing risk to the community."

Put another way: Health officials were mum on potential sources as the outbreak unfolded and now say there is no reason to identify the source because the outbreak has ended.

Martin said the department "categorically disagrees" with any suggestion officials "withheld critical information from the public."

A Nov. 20 investigation by The Arizona Republic [tied E. coli cases to the state fair](#), with multiple parents reporting their children became sick after coming in contact with a pig at the fair's petting zoo. Dozens were hospitalized, several with acute kidney failure.

Parents started taking children to hospitals days after fair ended in late October and they say they were interviewed by state and county health investigators who, along with doctors and nurses, questioned them about whether they attended the fair.

Maricopa County Health officials confirmed to The Republic in November they were investigating the fair as a potential source and a spokesperson for the [fair acknowledged the connection to the petting zoo](#), but no public notifications were made. The state Health Department has not acknowledged the fair as a potential source of the E. coli infections.

The lack of information surrounding outbreaks is a new and troubling trend among local and state officials nationwide, according to health advocates and lawyers who specialize in tracking foodborne illnesses and other environmental contagions. They say that is especially true when it comes to fairs.

"They bend over backward not to implicate county fairs and petting zoos," said [Bill Marler](#), a food-safety lawyer in Seattle who has tracked [tracked E. coli cases for years](#). "There is something that happens with state and local officials when it comes to petting zoos."

Marler in late November was hired by the family of a Phoenix girl who suffered kidney failure during the outbreak.

Not identifying potential sources prevents the public from taking precautions, Marler said. It can also lead to misdiagnosis and treatment delays for people who write off symptoms. And in extreme cases, it result in doctors prescribing the wrong medications, such as antibiotics, with tragic consequences, he said.

"Knowing that you have been exposed or that your child has been exposed, it's likely you're going to deal with the outset of symptoms different than if you have a tummy bug," Marler said. "You need to get to the hospital sooner rather than later."

E. coli has a 10-day incubation period, which means people could have gotten sick and possibly exposed others long after the fair ended Oct. 26.

The lack of information about the Maricopa County outbreak left parents trying to piece together how their kids were infected through conversations with nurses and doctors, health investigators and health advocates, with many raising alarms on social media.

The state Health Department issued a "health advisory" or alert Nov. 13 to health-care providers based on the increase in E. coli cases. It provided clinical guidance about testing, diagnosis, and prevention. But it wasn't meant for the public.

"These alerts are part of our ongoing surveillance and response process and are intended for clinical and public health use, rather than public dissemination," Martin said in his Dec. 2 email.

He confirmed a "concentration of cases was reported in Maricopa County," which is the closest state officials have come to identifying a source. The department in October counted 44 "probable and confirmed statewide cases," including some that were genetically linked, indicating people were infected with the same strain from the same source.

Martin pointed to a pair of websites the Health Department uses to track cases. One, which he referred to as a "[public surveillance dashboard](#)" provides data primarily related to statewide infectious disease counts. The [other requires an account log-in](#) and is used to communicate with health-care providers, infection specialists and local public health agencies.

Records of monthly morbidity rates collected by the state shows there were 47 E. coli cases in October and 43 in November. It was last updated Dec. 2.

While the dashboard confirms "a two-fold increase" of E. Coli cases in October," neither site appears to provide readily accessible, real-time information the public could use to learn about an outbreak as it unfolds. There is no mention of the Arizona State Fair or the petting zoo.

Martin referred questions about the fair to the county Health Department, saying ADHS is not leading the investigation into the E. coli outbreak.

"When evidence confirms an ongoing exposure that poses a risk to the general public, ADHS works with local health departments to issue public-facing advisories," he said.

## **Advocate: Withholding outbreak information 'is like the new game'**

The public's first inkling the state fair could be the source of the E. coli outbreak came from a nonprofit group that supports children afflicted with a type of kidney failure often associated with E. coli. The group pointed to the [Arizona State Fair as the source in emails and in social media posts](#).

Directors of the Tennessee-based group, [Parker's Promise](#), said two parents contacted them from Phoenix Children's Hospital in early November and reported their children got sick after visiting the fair's petting zoo. They soon heard from others.

Mary McGonigle-Martin, the organization's vice president, said public health officials put lives at risk by holding back information about the source of outbreaks. She said there is no reason public health officials should protect fairs or zoos.

"This is like the new game," she said. "They don't want to release it to the public ... and when it's over, they say people don't need to know about it."

About 31 states, including Arizona, have laws protecting agritourism and often shield farms, fairs and zoo operators from liability.

**E. coli is the shortened name of a bacteria called *Escherichia coli*.** It is found in the environment, foods, and intestines of people and animals. Some strains of *E. coli* aren't dangerous, but others can be fatal. It can cause infections, pneumonia and kidney failure.

*E. coli* typically spreads through contact with fecal matter. It can be transmitted through contaminated food or from person-to-person or animals.

Most people infected with *E. coli* experience diarrhea, severe stomach cramps and vomiting and recover within one week. Children younger than 5, older adults and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to develop severe reactions.

The exact number of *E. coli* cases tied to the Maricopa County outbreak is unknown. Parents who spoke to The Republic said doctors at Phoenix Children's told them they treated more than 100 kids sick with an *E. coli* strain known as STEC, or Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* bacteria.

Hospital officials would not confirm the number or severity of cases.

Jenna Trybus of Phoenix, said at least eight children, including her 12-year-old daughter, were hospitalized with hemolytic uremic syndrome, a sometimes fatal condition caused by the STEC that can lead to kidney failure. Her daughter spent nearly three weeks at Phoenix Children's undergoing blood transfusions, platelet replacement and dialysis.

Doctors and nurses questioned parents if they had gone to the fair, Trybus said: "It seemed like the petting zoo and the fair was a common denominator."

Trybus has hired Marler's firm to investigate the outbreak. She and other parents [told The Republic their children got sick after petting a pig.](#)

Gilbert resident Sommer Lee said her daughter was hospitalized for four days beginning Nov. 1 with STEC after petting a pig inside the zoo enclosure on the last day the fair was open. It was the only animal she touched. Her boyfriend, who did not touch the animal, did not get sick.

Lee said state and county health investigators interviewed her daughter about the exposure and indicated the petting zoo could be a "possible culprit."

## **Fair officials say outbreak will 'definitely factor' in 2026 plans**

State fair officials said the E. coli outbreak will affect on what happens there in 2026.

"We have not started working on the 2026 Arizona State Fair," spokesperson Brianda Martinez said in an email statement. "The current situation will definitely factor into our discussions regarding all programming for 2026."

She said the fair has contacted the petting zoo vendor and made it aware of the situation. They also provided information about the vendor to county and state health investigators.

The petting zoo is [operated by a company called Great American Entertainment](#) in Stephenville, Texas. A representative on Nov. 21 declined to answer questions about the E. coli outbreak and hung up. Owners and managers have not responded to subsequent calls and messages.

Great American has operated the fair's petting zoo for at least 15 years as The Great American Petting Zoo. The company was founded in 1983 and bills itself online as "the number one educational and entertainment attraction company in the

country." It provides "hands-on" shows for the event, fair and rodeo industry, according to its website.

Great American was [involved in a 2005 E. coli outbreak](#) at a fair in Fresno, Calif., that left six children hospitalized, including a 2-year-old who developed hemolytic uremic syndrome, records show. Her kidneys failed and she had a series of strokes which left her with damaged kidneys, blindness in one eye, and difficulty walking.

The girl's parents sued the Big Fresno Fair and Great American. The fair agreed to \$2.15 million settlement in 2010, but Great American continued to fight. The outcome of the case is unknown. Company officials would not respond to questions about the lawsuit.

Great American acknowledges the "growing concern" of E. coli on its website, saying it has stayed ahead of the issue for more than 40 years.

"We have been following the same stringent cleaning and sanitization procedures since the founding of our company," says on the website.

Fair officials confirmed, however, there were no hand-washing stations with soap and running water attached to the petting exhibit. There were some nearby.

The petting zoo was located in the fair's agriculture building. Martinez said there were hand-washing stations and full restrooms inside the building and close to the petting zoo. But hand sanitizer was all that was available at the zoo itself. Hand sanitizer does not eliminate some strains of E. coli.

## **Will fair follow through with any changes to petting zoo?**

Marler said he doubts much will change at the Arizona State Fair until public health officials and fair operators acknowledge petting zoos pose serious risks to public health and take action to limit exposure.

He said he's heard the promises of safety reform repeatedly in the past three decades and the same problems arise in each new case: Not enough signage, not

enough hand-washing stations and few prohibitions on bringing food into exhibits.

"They are never going to do the things they say they are going to do when these things happen," Marler said. "It is crazy."

Testing in one recent E. coli outbreak at a state fair outside Arizona found E. coli in the rafters of a barn where people walked, kicking up dust, breathing in tainted air and eating cotton candy, he said. More than 100 people got sick.

"It's one of those things — people just don't want to deal with the reality that these things just aren't safe for kids," Marler said.

Add to that the unwillingness of public health officials to call out fairs and petting zoos when outbreaks occur and you have all the elements for an often preventable tragedy, he said.

The incubation period for E.coli is about 10 days. In the time it takes someone to develop symptoms and realize it isn't just the flu, they could have exposed others, particularly siblings and parents.

Take the Arizona State Fair. It ran in Phoenix from Sept. 19 to Oct. 26. More than 1 million people attended. That almost certainly includes residents from other states and countries. Who is to say what they thought if days after returning home they started getting sick, Marler said.

Health officials need to be careful not to identify the wrong source, but he said there is a balance between being transparent and getting it right.

"They should be able to tell you how many people tested positive and if they had the same genome sequence," Marler said.

It is a reportable disease, he said, not a secret.

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