

**PHOENIX**

# Arizona State Fair pig may be source of E. coli that hospitalized kids

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**Key Points** AI-assisted summary ⓘ

At least four children who were hospitalized touched a pig at the petting zoo before getting sick.

The petting zoo lacked hand-washing stations, offering only hand sanitizer, which does not kill E. coli. Bathrooms were nearby.

The Arizona State Fair in Phoenix ran from Sept. 19 to Oct. 26. More than 1 million people attended.

At least four children hospitalized with a virulent strain of E. coli touched a pig at the Arizona State Fair's petting zoo days before they got sick, their parents and advocates say.

The pig was part of the fair's "Great American Petting Zoo," which encouraged families to get "up close and personal with furry and fuzzy friends" but did not include hand-washing stations attached to the exhibit.

County health officials [confirmed to The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com](#) that investigators identified the fair as a possible source of the infection, which reportedly sent dozens of the kids to emergency rooms and left several in acute kidney failure.

Fair officials have acknowledged they were "made aware of several E. coli cases" and were working with county and state investigators. But state Health officials have been mum on the petting zoo and any possible contamination through a pig.

The lack of information has left parents to piece together how their kids were infected through conversations with nurses and doctors, health investigators and representatives of a nonprofit group that first raised alarms about the fair.

"My daughter did go to the petting zoo and she did pet a pig," said Jenna Trybus of Phoenix, whose 12-year-old daughter spent nearly three weeks at Phoenix Children's hospital undergoing two blood transfusions and dialysis after her kidneys shut down.

"Doctors and nurses were asking everybody if they had gone to the fair," Trybus told The Republic. "It seemed like the petting zoo and the fair was a common denominator."

The Arizona State Fair in Phoenix ran from Sept. 19 to Oct. 26. More than 1 million people attended.

Petting zoos are notorious for outbreaks of an E. coli strain known as STEC, or Shiga toxin-producing E. coli bacteria, which causes vomiting, bloody diarrhea, cramps and dehydration that can lead to kidney failure.

Outbreaks have been repeatedly traced to fairs, farms and zoos, including one at the San Diego County Fair in 2019 responsible for the death of a 2-year-old.

[Bill Marler](#), a world renowned food-safety lawyer in Seattle, [has tracked E. coli cases for years](#). "Fairs, petting zoos, and other animal exhibits have been increasingly linked to E. coli," he warned in a fair and petting zoo safety sheet on his website.

After a 2023 outbreak at a Tennessee petting zoo, Marler wrote online, "[Here we go again](#)." Seven children were hospitalized.

## **'Over 100 kids got sick' one mother heard doctor say**

The exact number of E. coli cases tied to the Arizona outbreak is unknown.

Trybus said doctors at Children's Hospital told her the hospital treated more than 100 kids sick with STEC. At least eight children, including her daughter, were hospitalized with hemolytic uremic syndrome caused by the STEC, she said.

"While we were there, there were eight going through this ... going through dialysis," she said. "One doctor came in and said over 100 kids got sick."

Officials with the Arizona Department of Health confirmed the E. coli outbreak without acknowledging a geographic tie, the scope, potential source or number of cases. In general terms, they said the department saw a "twofold increase" of E. coli cases statewide in October.

"There has also been an increase in hospitalizations involving hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS), a serious complication linked to this infection," DHS media Director JP Martin said in a Nov. 18 email.

Trybus said her daughter attended the fair Oct. 26 with her father. She started getting sick three days later and was hospitalized Nov. 1 after blood in her stool tested positive for STEC.

Her daughter was unable to keep anything down. Her condition worsened. Bloodwork showed toxins from the E. coli were destroying her red blood cells. She ended up on a feeding tube.

"It was terrifying," Trybus said. "It's your kid, your baby. ... It was really bad. It was shocking how bad it got."

Her daughter was released from the hospital Nov. 18.

"Finally, finally she did recover her kidney function," Trybus said. "I feel really lucky that she is getting better."

## 'It's the pig': Nonprofit first raised alarms on State Fair

What happened to Trybus' daughter is remarkably similar to accounts other parents shared with a nonprofit group that [supports children afflicted with HUS](#).

Officials at Tennessee-based Parker's Promise were the [first to publicly tie the outbreak](#) in Arizona to the State Fair and raise concerns about the petting zoo. They said multiple parents reported that their children got sick after petting a pig there.

"It is the pig," Mary McGonigle-Martin, vice president of the organization, said. "We have confirmed four kids, but I'm sure there were more who petted the pig."

The group focused on the pig after hearing from Sommer Lee of Gilbert, whose daughter was hospitalized for four days with STEC.

Lee told The Republic her 16-year-old daughter stopped to pet a pig inside the zoo enclosure while at the fair Oct. 26 with her boyfriend. It was the only animal she touched. Her boyfriend, who did not touch the animal, did not get sick.

Investigators with the state and county Health departments interviewed her daughter about the exposure and indicated the petting zoo could be a "possible culprit," Lee said.

McGonigle-Martin said parents reported the petting zoo had only hand-sanitizer stations attached to the exhibit and had signs directing them to nearby bathrooms.

"Hand sanitizer does not kill E. coli," she said. "The Arizona State Fair in the future needs to have handwashing stations as you leave the zoo, not just signs."

Fair officials confirmed Nov. 21 there are no hand-washing stations with soap and running water attached to the exhibit. There are some nearby.

Fair spokesperson Brianda Martinez said the petting zoo is located in the fair's agriculture building. She said there are hand-washing stations and full restrooms

inside the building and close to the petting zoo. But hand sanitizer is all that is available at the zoo.

Martinez said the same vendor, Great American Petting Zoo, has run the petting zoo at the fair for more than 15 years. Other vendors provide different animal attractions such as farm tours, ag display, camels and birds.

The 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 or say if health inspectors had contacted them before hanging up.

## **Petting zoos are 'high risk and dangerous'**

Petting zoos might seem benign, a bucolic place for families with goats, pigs and other docile farm animals running under the feet of children. But they are "a high-risk and dangerous activity," McGonigle-Martin said.

Does she intentionally mean to make zoos sound scary? Yes.

"You better scare people because there is a real scare here," she said.

There are ways to make petting zoos safer, such as requiring soap and water at each enclosure or mandating paper gowns and booties for anyone entering an animal pen, she said.

The point is to minimize exposure to poop, which is where E. coli lives.

**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 contaminated food, but it can be transmitted through people 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 hemolytic uremic syndrome.

It takes an average of three to four days to get sick after eating food infected with E. coli or coming into contact with it through animals, but it can take up to eight days for symptoms to develop.

## **Families could face massive medical bills from E. coli exposure**

Trybus has no idea what her daughter's hospitalization will cost, or how much of it insurance will cover, but she knows it is going to be hundreds of thousands of dollars.

She said her initial out of pocket at Children's was \$2,300 and expects that was based on whatever copay her insurance requires. But she wasn't thinking about money when her daughter was suffering.

"I assume more bills are coming," Trybus said.

McGonigle-Martin acknowledged the costs can be overwhelming and parents often have little recourse, because state laws protecting agritourism can give legal immunity to farms, fairs and zoo operators. About 31 states have some version of the law, including Arizona.

Parker's Promise has organized fundraisers for families facing mounting legal bills. McGonigle-Martin said the group helped a single parent who was hospitalized for two months and could not pay rent.

The group's mission is to help parents while their children are hospitalized. It provides emotional support, medical guidance and education about dangers of what the group calls "environmental pathogens," of which STEC is one of the worst.

The organization was founded in 2023 by Morgan Stine, a physician's assistant whose 7-year-old son, Parker, got STEC at a Tennessee farm camp a year earlier, according to the agency's website. He was hospitalized for eight days. One of his jobs at the farm was caring for a baby goat.

Fourteen people became ill in the E. coli outbreak and a 2-year-old boy died.

The work also is personal for McGonigle-Martin, a retired high school counselor, whose 7-year-old son was hospitalized for 56 days in 2006 with an E. coli infection that turned into hemolytic uremic syndrome.

Part of what is driving her is advocating policy change and passing mandated safety standards for fairs and petting zoos.

"We need to quit protecting big ag," she said. "People in Arizona have a right to know the fair has risks."

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