

**PHOENIX**

# E. coli outbreak among kids could be tied to Arizona State Fair

**Robert Anglen**

Arizona Republic

Nov. 20, 2025, 4:30 a.m. MT

**Key Points** AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Arizona health officials are investigating a potential link between an E. coli outbreak and the State Fair.

Multiple children were hospitalized with the infection, with some parents reporting they visited the fair's petting zoo.

A nonprofit group first raised public alarms, citing reports from parents whose children fell ill after attending the fair.

Arizona health officials were investigating whether an E. coli outbreak that has hospitalized multiple children was tied to the State Fair.

Maricopa County health officials confirmed they were trying to trace the source of the virulent outbreak, which parents and advocates said might have originated at the fair's petting zoo.

"I can confirm that it is under investigation," Jeanene Fowler, Maricopa County Health executive director, said of the fair, which ran for a month in Phoenix, ending in late October.

The number of E. coli cases was unknown. But at least eight children were hospitalized with the infection, according to the mother of a 16-year-old who spent four days at Phoenix Children's Hospital in early November.

"My daughter was No. 5 of the cases seen at Children's Hospital when we got there. By the time we left, there had been eight confirmed cases," Sommer Lee of Gilbert said.

She said hospital staff members had talked to her about the number of cases and the possible origin of the outbreak: "All of the children at Phoenix ... visited the fair as confirmed by nurses and doctors."

State health and fair officials would not address the fair's possible connection to the outbreak and have not issued any public bulletins about the source.

Alarms were first raised publicly by [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 in November and reported their children got sick after visiting the fair's petting zoo. Since then, two more parents reached out via social media to say their kids also were hospitalized with E. coli.

Three of the four parents said their kids visited the fair before getting sick, the group's vice president, Mary McGonigle-Martin, told The Arizona Republic.

The parents of a 2-year-old and a 12-year-old reported in November that their kids were being treated for hemolytic uremic syndrome, a sometimes fatal disease that affects the kidneys and blood clotting, and is often caused by an infection from bacteria like E. coli, she said.

"We have three parents who were at the State Fair," McGonigle-Martin said. "Parents in Arizona need to know that there is an active outbreak."

## **What is E. coli? How can you be infected?**

[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, but it can take up to eight days.

The Arizona State Fair in Phoenix ran from Sept. 19 to Oct. 26. Fair spokesperson Brianda Martinez did not respond to multiple interview requests by phone and email. She did not answer questions about the outbreak.

The Arizona Department of Health Services said it saw a "twofold increase" of E. coli cases statewide in October. The department did not specify where the cases were reported or how many people reported getting sick.

"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. "This increase in E. coli is currently under investigation by local and state public health."

Martin did not address questions about the fair or about the reports from parents whose children were hospitalized.

"The community has the right to know if there is an active outbreak," McGonigle-Martin said, adding there likely were many more cases of E. coli that did not require hospitalization and went unreported. "We know state fair petting zoos are a huge risk for kids."

## 'She fared better than other kids'

Lee, the mother of the 16-year-old who was hospitalized, said her daughter went to the fair with her boyfriend Oct. 26. Both ate corn dogs and other food from the same vendors. But only she stopped to pet a pig inside the zoo enclosure. The boyfriend did not get sick, Lee said.

Her daughter was admitted into Phoenix Children's on Nov. 1 and was released on Nov. 4. She did not experience kidney failure, but Lee said, other kids did.

"She fared better than other kids who were younger," she said. "It is a brutal and violent illness."

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.

Lee said she wanted her daughter's case to serve as a warning to others.

"I hope it can help other people avoid what we went through," Lee said. "The fair, where all this is happening, should be held accountable."

*Robert Anglen is an investigative reporter for The Republic. Reach him at [robert.anglen@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:robert.anglen@arizonarepublic.com). Follow him on X @robertanglen.*