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ining at a Mexican restaurant is usually a very enjoyable experience, but for nearly 600 people near Pittsburgh in early November, 2003, it was anything but. All contracted hepatitis A, a viral infection of the liver that causes jaundice (yellowing of the skin and sclera of the eye), abdominal pain, nausea, diarrhea, fatigue, loss of appetite, and fever. Three people died from the usually mild infection.

To identify the culinary culprit, epidemiologists from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention meticulously interviewed all of the sick people, plus others who had eaten at the restaurant in the six weeks prior to the onset of symptoms. All of the sick individuals had eaten cold salsa containing uncooked green onions, set out with chips for all customers. Those who had eaten only the hot salsa, made with white onions, were well.

Comparison of the DNA sequences from the Pittsburgh onions to sequences from onions behind similar outbreaks elsewhere enabled researchers to trace the guilty vegetables to specific farms in Mexico. The infection, which is passed by fecal contact, may have begun when infected workers handled the onions, or when infected water was used for irrigation. Preparation of the onions spread the problem. Once at the Pittsburgh restaurant, the onions sat in bunches in a shared water container, so that even if only one onion was tainted, the infection quickly spread to all. From the size of the outbreak, that is apparently what happened.



Fresh vegetables must be washed—food poisoning is no picnic!

Health officials immediately closed the restaurant. Nearly 9,000 people who also might have eaten the onions but did not have symptoms were given injections of immunoglobulins to halt the infection, and health agencies issued advisories for consumers to cook green onions. ■