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**Date:** April 14, 2009

**For Immediate Release**

**Winnebago County Health Department Announces Gastrointestinal Illnesses  
Likely Associated with Cheese Produced by Unapproved Source**



April, 14, 2009 -The Winnebago County Health Department today announces an investigation of a cluster of gastrointestinal illnesses that appear linked to the consumption of cheese made by unlicensed vendors. At this time, there are three confirmed and four probable cases of like illness, all of whom are Hispanic. These cases have a recent food history that included consumption of cheese from an unapproved source(s). While more laboratory results are pending, the three confirmed cases were positive for *Campylobacter jejuni*. Testing of the cheese is still on-going at the Illinois Department of Public Health Laboratory - Springfield, but has thus far been found positive for fecal coliform and *Listeria*.

“We are concerned about people who may have this illegally manufactured cheese and may become ill from consuming it,” stated Mike Bacon, Administrator of Winnebago County Health Department. Consumers are strongly warned against buying or consuming cheese that is suspected of being made by an unlicensed manufacturer. Winnebago County Health Department recommends that persons who have cheese in their home that is not clearly labeled as having been manufactured by a licensed or regulated manufacturer, should not consume the cheese.

Winnebago County Health Department recommends that consumers who are ill with signs compatible with *Campylobacter* or *Listeria* (see below) should call their physician and call their local health department if the illnesses are believed to be linked to consumption of unapproved source cheeses. Legitimate, wholesome Mexican-style cheeses are available in the refrigerator case at retail stores and authenticated by label information specifying: legal name of the product, name and address of distributor or processor, quantity of contents, an ingredient statement, nutrition facts (in most cases).

*Campylobacter* is an infectious disease caused by bacteria which may produce diarrhea, cramping, abdominal pain, and fever generally within two to five days after exposure to the organism. The diarrhea can be bloody and individuals may experience nausea and vomiting. The illness typically lasts one week but some infected individuals may not have any symptoms.

*Listeria* is a serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacteria which may cause a fever, muscle aches, and sometimes nausea or diarrhea generally within two months after exposure to the organism. If infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions can occur. Infected pregnant women may experience only a mild, flu-like illness; however, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth, premature delivery, or infection of the newborn. Healthy adults and children occasionally get infected with *Listeria*, but they rarely become seriously ill.

The cheese product(s) have been reported to be sold in parking lots outside various facilities such as churches, stores, and other businesses. The complete list of distribution sites for this cheese are not yet known. The Department requests individuals to report vendors who are illegally selling uninspected cheeses. The Department recommends “always be sure to acquire food products from an approved manufacturing source and from facilities licensed by their health department,” said Larry Swacina, Director the Department’s Center for Environmental Health Improvement.

For more information log onto the Winnebago County Health Department website at [www.wchd.org](http://www.wchd.org).

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