An outbreak of illness among schoolchildren in London: toxic poisoning not mass hysteria

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Abstract

**Study objective** – To determine the cause of an outbreak of acute gastrointestinal illness that occurred shortly after lunch in children attending a school in London, UK.

**Design** – A questionnaire survey of children at the affected school was carried out on the day after the incident. Microbiological, environmental, and toxicological investigations were also undertaken.

**Setting** – A school in London, UK.

**Participants** – Altogether 374/468 (80%) of the children who had eaten lunch at the school on the day of the incident completed a questionnaire.

**Main results** – There was a significant association between illness and the consumption of raw cucumber (relative risk = 6·1; 95% confidence interval 2·2–16). Microbiological investigation of the foods served at lunch did not show any pathogens and toxicological investigations suggested that the cucumbers were contaminated by a pesticide.

**Conclusions** – Although the outbreak displayed several typical features of mass psychogenic illness, the most probable cause was a toxic chemical present in cucumber served at lunch. Those responsible for investigating outbreaks of illness should be aware of the possible toxicological causes and the appropriate modes of investigation. They should be wary of too readily attributing a psychogenic cause to unusual outbreaks of acute illness in schoolchildren.

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Background

On the afternoon of Monday 9 July, 1990, a public health department in London, UK was informed that more than 50 children suffering from acute gastroenteritis had arrived at a hospital emergency department from a local school.

The school was visited the same afternoon. Discussions with teachers showed that the first cases of illness had occurred within half an hour of the children eating lunch at school. Illness had only occurred at four of the seven sites which made up the school; these sites were separated by distances of up to one mile, and each site prepared and served their own meals. A wide range of foods had been available for lunch but the only food that all four affected sites had in common was raw cucumber. It was felt that a number of children, particularly the later casualties, were made to feel ill by the sight of their friends being sick and that some may have exaggerated their illness because they found the idea of an ambulance ride exciting! The school was not residential and lunch was the only meal served that day.

The illness was characterised by abdominal pain, nausea, and vomiting and seemed to be self limiting; all children attending hospital had recovered sufficiently to be discharged home within six hours of the onset of illness. Because of the rapid onset of symptoms after lunch, possibilities of psychogenic or toxicological causes were considered. The advice of the National Poisons Unit was obtained and further investigations were coordinated through an incident committee composed of the local consultant in communicable disease control, the chief environmental health officer, and a consultant from the National Poisons Unit.

Methods

**ENVIRONMENTAL INVESTIGATION**

A detailed inspection was made of the kitchens and food storage areas at each of the sites. The supplier of each food served at the meals was identified.

**EPIDEMIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION**

Food items eaten at the suspect lunch and symptoms of illness were ascertained through a questionnaire administered at the school on the morning after the incident. Apart from 64 children who had not eaten lunch at school the previous day (and in whom no illness had been reported), all children at the affected sites were requested to complete a questionnaire. In ad-
diction, to investigate a possible psychogenic cause for the incident, children and staff were interviewed in the week following the outbreak. Data from the questionnaire survey were analysed using Epi-Info Version 5 software. Multivariate analysis was carried out using the statistical package GLIM.

MICROBIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION
One sample of vomit from an affected child was obtained and cultured. Stool specimens from eight affected children were sent for bacteriological investigation. Food samples, recovered from plates and dustbins, were also cultured.

TOXICOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION
A search of published reports and other information sources was carried out to identify toxic agents that might cause similar symptoms. Advice was sought from other poisons centres, from botanists, and from experts from industry. Toxicological and forensic examination was carried out on cucumbers remaining at the affected sites and on cucumbers purchased locally as control samples. Methods included thin layer chromatography, high performance liquid chromatography, x-ray microanalysis, and atomic absorption spectrophotometry.

The nursery which supplied the cucumbers to the affected sites was traced and inspected, and samples of cucumbers submitted for toxicological analysis.

**Results**

**ENVIRONMENTAL INVESTIGATION**
The foods served for lunch at each site are given in table 1. Cucumber was the only food served at all four sites. Foods served at more than one site included apples (three sites), lettuce (three sites), pizza (two sites), sliced bread (two sites), white bread rolls (two sites), and tomatoes (two sites).

Each of the four sites affected by illness were found to have received their fruit and vegetables from the same supplier. The three unaffected sites had obtained their food from a different supplier.

**EPIDEMIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION**

**Questionnaires**

Altogether 374/468 (80%) of the children who ate lunch on the day of the incident completed a questionnaire. Their ages ranged from 5–13 years (mean 8·8) and a total of 124 (34%) were girls. Some 129 (34%) children said they became ill on 9 July. Common symptoms included abdominal pain 110 (85%), nausea 96 (74%), feeling hot 63 (48%), and vomiting 53 (41%). Only 15 (12%) suffered from loose stools.

A case was defined as any child attending the affected sites of the school who vomited on 9 July. The overall attack rate was 14% (53 cases). Table 2 shows the attack rates by sex, school site, age group, and consumption of food. Only those foods that were eaten at more than one site have been included.

For the whole cohort, children who had eaten cucumber had a significant risk of becoming cases (relative risk = 6·1; 95% confidence interval (CI) = 2·2, 16). Stratified analyses showed that the strength of the association between cases and cucumber consumption varied with both sex, school site, and age (table 3).

The associations between cases and the consumption of those foods that were served at more than one site were determined using the combined cohorts from each of the sites where that food had been on the menu. No significant positive associations were found. Using logistic regression, a main effects model was fitted to evaluate the risk of becoming a case in relation to age, sex, consumption of cucumber, and school site. Cucumber consumption, and sex and school site seemed to have a significant main effect on the risk of becoming a case. The effect of cucumber consumption on the risk of becoming a case remained highly significant.
toxic poisoning in schoolchildren

(p < 0.0001) after adjusting for the other variables and interactions. Table 4 shows the risk estimates by sex, school site, and consumption of cucumber. Overall, the relative risk of becoming a case with cucumber consumption was 27.5 (95% CI = 3.6, 212) in boys and 2.23 (95% CI = 0.6, 8.5) in girls.

Interviews with staff

Several cases of illness had occurred at three affected school sites before the teachers there were aware of illness at any of the other sites. One of the sites was situated within a military barracks with restricted access, making communication with children at other sites after lunch virtually impossible.

Interviews with children

Thirty seven cases were interviewed in depth one week after the incident. Only 7 (19%) children could recall being told that there might be something wrong with the food before they became ill. Ten (27%) children said that they had neither seen someone else being sick nor heard anyone complaining of illness before they themselves became ill. Three (8%) claimed that they had not eaten cucumber. The remainder had eaten a significant amount of cucumber ranging from 1-9 large pieces (average 3.5). Only four (11%) said that the cucumber tasted unusual; they described the taste as sour, sharp, or tangy. The children complained of a variety of symptoms other than nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain. The commonest were: dizziness (40%), sore or dry throat (23%), headache (20%), itchy or prickly skin (11%), and blurred vision (11%). Most children had recovered completely by the day after the incident but a few complained of continuing mild symptoms of nausea and abdominal pain.

Microbiological investigation

There was no bacterial growth from the sample of vomit. Staphylococcus aureus was cultured from four of the eight stool samples submitted but phage typing showed that they were all of different strains. No food poisoning organisms were detected in samples of cucumber, apples, lettuce, tomatoes, and turkey.

Toxicological investigation

Investigations focused on possible non-microbial, toxic agents in the cucumber. These could be of two sorts: substances naturally present in the food or chemical contaminants.

In some circumstances cucumbers may biosynthesise natural toxins called cucurbatins. The reported effects of these substances are similar to strychnine intoxication and quite different from those reported in this outbreak. However, a band in the ultra violet spectrum of material obtained from thin layer chromatography of an extract of suspect cucumber was similar to that of cucurbatin derivatives. This band was not present in control cucumbers. Therefore the possibility that cucurbatins were responsible for the illness could not be completely excluded. Analyses also indicated the presence of an alkaloid which could not be identified.

Of the chemicals approved for use on cucumbers in the UK, a few (namely some organophosphates, carbamate pesticides, and pyrethroids) may cause gastrointestinal illnesses, but the children did not display the usual pattern of illness due to poisoning by any of these substances. The literature search, however, showed reports of incidents of food poisoning by cucumbers and watermelons, with some similarities to the illness in this outbreak, caused by contamination by the carbamate pesticide, aldicarb.

The inspection of the nursery which supplied the cucumbers to the affected sites showed that they were grown in a rockwool hydroponic system and were treated with a fungicide containing the active ingredient, imazalil, and various fertilisers. No evidence of the use of aldicarb was found. The water supply to the farm was not investigated.

Laboratory analyses of cucumbers for pesticides were therefore restricted to detecting aldicarb (as its metabolite aldicarb sulphoxide (ASO)) and imazalil, the only pesticide reported to have been used in the nursery. Analysis of cucumbers from the school detected a peak in the high performance liquid chromatogram appropriate for ASO. This was not present in control cucumbers. Although this could not be regarded as definitive evidence for the presence of this pesticide metabolite since no reference sample could be obtained for comparison, it strongly supported the possibility of aldicarb contamination.

Imazalil was not detected in the samples of cucumber from the school but was found in the cucumbers from the nursery at a concentration of 0.03 mg/kg. There is little knowledge of the toxicity of imazalil in humans but it was thought that this level would be unlikely to cause illness.

Other possible contaminants that might cause a similar illness include copper sulphate, zinc and other elemental metals, detergents and fluoride. All of these would have given an

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Table 4 Multivariate analysis: relative risks (RR) of illness by sex, school site, and cucumber consumption

<table>
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<th>Sex</th>
<th>Cucumber consumption</th>
<th>School site</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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* Risks calculated relative to hypothetical child: age = 5; sex = male; site = A; no cucumber consumption.
obvious colour or taste, or both, to the contami-
inated food and x ray microanalysis and
atomic absorption spectrophotometry of the
suspect cucumbers showed no evidence of
foreign elements or heavy metal contaminants.
Examination of samples of cucumber by light
microscopy showed no evidence of tampering.

Discussion and conclusions
Three possible causes of the outbreak need to
be considered: mass psychogenic illness, mi-
crobial contamination of food, and chemical
contamination of food.

At first sight, the rapid onset and resolution
of symptoms, the higher attack rate in girls, the
aneedotol evidence of psychogenic illness, and
the fact that cucumber, the only food that was
served in all four affected sites is very rarely
associated with outbreaks of food borne dis-
case, all suggested mass psychogenic ill-
ness. Detailed investigation, however, showed
this to be an unlikely diagnosis. Trans-
mision of mass psychogenic illness invariably
occurs by line of sight or verbal communica-
tion. In this outbreak, illness occurred simul-
taneously in different sites of the school, with
neither teachers nor schoolchildren being
aware of illness at other sites. Bizarre symp-
toms, often with evidence of overt hyperventi-
lation, together with recurrences of illness
after an initial outbreak have often been
reported in outbreaks of mass psychogenic
illness. In this outbreak, symptoms were fairly
uniform and no new cases of illness were
reported in the days after the outbreak despite
local and national media reports of a “mystery
illness” at the school.

Two features of the outbreak strongly
suggest that a toxic agent ingested at lunch
initiated the incident. Firstly, the affected sites
had all received their fruit and vegetables
(including cucumber) from the same grower
and supplier, whereas the cucumbers at the
unaffected sites came from a different supplier.
Secondly, epidemiological investigations
showed a strong association between illness
and the consumption of cucumber.

Was this association valid? Non-response
bias could have led to a spurious association if
response rates had been independently associ-
ated with both illness and cucumber consump-
tion. Although there is some suggestion that
response rates may have varied with illness,
several teachers thought that a few of the most
severely affected children had stayed away
from school the following day. This bias is
unlikely to have been significant as only four of
28 (14%) cases identified from the hospital
attenders had failed to complete a question-
naire. Also it is difficult to envisage how the
response rate could be independently associ-
ated with cucumber consumption.

Significant information bias in the ascertain-
ment of case status is also unlikely as this
information was validated by examining hos-
pital records and interviews with cases.

Information bias over whether or not a child
had eaten cucumber could have occurred. The
fact that cucumber was the only food eaten at
all the affected sites – and hence was a likely
culprit – was recognised by the headmaster in
conversations with the investigating team on
the evening of the outbreak. Although it is
unlikely that any children had made a similar
deduction by the time they completed the
questionnaire, it is possible that a few of the
teachers may have done so and thus influenced
the recording of cucumber consumption – es-
pecially in the younger age groups who needed
their teacher’s help to complete the question-
naire. Although such a bias is a distinct possi-
bility, it is unlikely to have been responsible
for such a strong association between illness
and cucumber consumption. The association
between illness and cucumber consumption
was only strong and significant in the boys,
although girls were more likely to have become
ill than boys. One possible explanation, backed
up by anecdotal evidence from staff at the
school, is that a secondary wave of psychogenic
disease may have caused a similar pattern of
illnesses among girls, thereby diluting the strength of
the association.

There are certain aspects of this outbreak
that we would have liked to have investigated
further: the presence of a dose-response rela-
tionship between cucumber consumption and
vomiting; the low attack rate in site C; and
more extensive microbiological investigations.
We were hampered, however, by the fact that
the outbreak occurred on the last week of the
school term. By the time we had the results
of the initial questionnaire, suggesting that
cucumber was the culprit, many children (es-
pecially those who had become ill) stopped
attending the school either because of the
outbreak (and resulting media publicity) or
because it was the last week of term.

The onset of illness within one hour of
eating lunch excludes all known bacterial
agents other than the preformed enterotoxins
of Staphylococcus aureus and Bacillus cereus.22
Both as foods consumed at the
unaffected sites come from a different supplier.
Microbiological investigations failed to show
either organism in the food samples, and
neither cucumber nor the other foods served
at several affected sites are commonly associated
with toxin producing microbial contamina-
tion.22

Although toxicological and forensic investiga-
tions failed to identify definitively an etio-
logical agent, the results support the possi-
bility of aldicarb poisoning. It is interesting to
compare this outbreak with five reported inci-
dents of food poisoning from cucumbers or
watermelons contaminated with the pesticide,
aldicarb.2021 The illness described in these inci-
dents was similar to that in this outbreak in
that it was rapid in onset, gastrointestinal
symptoms were prominent, and most victims
recovered quickly and completely without any
specific medical treatment. Aldicarb sulfoxide,
a metabolite of aldicarb, was found in
samples of melons or cucumbers in each of the
outbreaks, and estimates of the dosages of
ASO that had caused illness in individuals21
have suggested that people could have become
ill after ingesting produce contaminated with ASO at levels below the detection limit of 0-2 parts per million. More recently, there have been reports of an outbreak of illness in Eire caused by cucumbers contaminated with aldicarb.24

Aldicarb is a widely used pesticide and able to persist in the ground water. When dissolved in water it is taken up by the roots of cucumbers and other cucurbitaceae such as melons and deposited in the fruit. This pesticide, however, is not approved for use on cucumbers in the United States or in Britain. In the 1987 California incident, a melon was taken from a field where melons were being grown for seed and aldicarb was being applied legally, but it is probable21 that in the other incidents the cucumber growers had kept aldicarb on the premises to treat ornamental plants and there had been employee error or greenhouse pest problems, or both, leading to its misuse.

We conclude that the cause of the outbreak was a toxic chemical, most probably aldicarb, present in cucumber served at lunch. A secondary wave of psychogenic illness may have occurred after the initial outbreak. Investigators should be alert to possible toxicological causes of outbreaks of acute illness. Toxicological investigations require considerable expertise in elucidating possible causal agents and in the correct collection and storage of specimens. Advice should be sought early from local poison units. Investigators should beware of too readily attributing a psychogenic cause to unusual outbreaks of acute illness in schoolchildren.

We wish to thank Mr Matthew Hickman, Dr Akhtar Khakoo, and the environmental health officers of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London for their help in the investigation. We are most grateful for the help of Ms Heather Wiseman of the National Poisons Unit, and Ms Jane Bruce, Senior Statistician at the PHLS Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre. We thank Reading Scientific Services Limited for performing the forensic and toxicological investigations.