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Tainted burgers sicken up to 21; Lauderdale teen sues

Staff and wire report

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TRENTON, N.J.

Twenty-one people in eight states may have fallen ill after eating hamburgers possibly contaminated with E. coli bacteria, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Wednesday. And a Fort Lauderdale family filed suit against Wal-Mart, claiming their teenager was sickened by a tainted patty purchased at one of the retail giant's stores.

CDC spokeswoman Lola Russell said three cases were confirmed as being linked to the ground beef, with the other 18 cases possibly linked and under investigation. No one has died, Russell said.

Elizabeth, N.J.-based Topps Meat Company on Tuesday announced a recall of frozen hamburgers it distributed. The recall affects 331,582 pounds of frozen beef patties and 21 products distributed nationwide, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Topps said.

The boxes recalled carry the number "Est. 9748" inside the USDA mark of inspection and were produced on June 22, July 12 or July 23, the USDA said. A list of recalled products is available at www.toppsmeat.com.

Russell and USDA spokeswoman Amanda Eamich said the illnesses were reported in Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Maine, New Jersey, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Samantha Safranek, 18, suffered kidney failure, was hospitalized for three weeks in August and nearly died, according to the suit filed by Scott Schlesinger, the family's attorney.

A spokeswoman for Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. said Wednesday afternoon that the corporation had not yet been served with or read the lawsuit and were unable to comment.

Samantha's mother, Anna Safranek, bought beef patties produced by Topps Meat in mid-August at a Pembroke Pines Wal-Mart, the suit says.

After her daughter became ill, the U.S. Department of Agriculture tested some of the patties and found they were contaminated with a strain of E. coli, the suit says.

"We're not sure why it took both Topps and Wal-Mart so long to respond to this danger," Schlesinger said in a news release. "They were both notified last month, once Samantha's lab test results were completed and once the E. coli diagnosis was made."