

Youngster falls ill after eating chitterlings

NEW YORK, Apr 26 (Reuters Health) - Some diabetics and others with weakened immune systems may do well to steer clear of chitterlings, a dish consisting of boiled pig intestines that is served up as traditional holiday fare in the Southern US.

A 12-year-old boy with poorly controlled diabetes became seriously ill after eating the food in three separate Christmas dinners, according to a report in the April 27th issue of The New England Journal of Medicine.

The child was hospitalized with enteritis necroticans, a potentially life-threatening intestinal infection that is rare in America and causes severe stomach pain, vomiting of blood and low blood pressure. The boy eventually had to have surgery to restore his intestinal function, according to Dr. Toni M. Petrillo, of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta in Egleston and colleagues. The culprit turned out to be a chitterlings-contaminating bacterium known as *Clostridium perfringens* type C, which produces a toxin that is lethal to tissue in the digestive tract.

More common in developing countries, enteritis necroticans can occur in children who eat large amounts of pork or in those who consume large meals after a period of starvation. Other factors that can contribute to the illness are protein malnutrition, and the consumption of sweet potatoes, which can interfere with the breakdown of the bacterial toxin in the intestines.

In this case, Petrillo told Reuters Health, the boy was vulnerable to infection from the chitterlings because he had poorly controlled type 1 diabetes. This type of diabetes usually occurs in childhood and requires daily injections of insulin in order to control blood sugar. Diabetic patients can have protein malnutrition and have a reduction in motility of the intestines, a factor that can allow the bacteria to take hold and grow.

However, Petrillo added, even diabetics who keep their blood sugar in check are more prone to infections, as are infants and anyone with an immune-related chronic illness.

Petrillo advised taking care in cleaning chitterlings, being sure not to contaminate foods that will be served raw, such as salads or infant food. Even cooking the chitterlings, however, may not rid them of bacteria, he said. According to Petrillo, other foods the immunocompromised should avoid include raw oysters and eggs, undercooked hamburger, unpasteurized milk and juice, and bean sprouts.