

Kennedy Creek *Campylobacter* Outbreak  
June 7, 2022 Update

1. Why are public health professionals concerned?

Sanders and Mineral counties, and the Montana DPHHS Public Health and Safety Division began investigating a *Campylobacter* outbreak in mid-May 2022. A linked case has also been reported in Flathead County. Approximately 20 cases of *Campylobacter* have been identified, 18 of which reported consuming water from the Kennedy Creek watering point over a period of approximately 2-3 weeks during late April and early May 2022. Of the 20 cases, 13 cases were known to have visited a healthcare provider due to the severity of symptoms, and all reportedly had positive lab results after testing. Isolates from two positive samples were sent to the DPHHS Environmental Laboratory and *Campylobacter* infection was confirmed. A water sample was taken from the discharge point and the DPHHS Environmental Laboratory successfully cultured *Campylobacter* from the sample.

As of Friday, June 3, 2022, the state laboratory has matched clinical and water sample specimens by whole genome sequencing. The laboratory stated the specimens are 0-1 alleles apart, meaning they are highly genetically related. The epidemiological evidence linking the cases to the water source was already very strong, and actionable in and of itself. This provides confirmatory evidence that these illnesses are the result of drinking water directly from Kennedy Creek.

2. What is *Campylobacter*?

*Campylobacter* infection, or campylobacteriosis, is caused by *Campylobacter* bacteria. It is the most common bacterial cause of diarrheal illness in the United States.

3. What are the symptoms of a *Campylobacter* infection?

People with *Campylobacter* infection usually have diarrhea (often bloody), fever, and stomach cramps. Nausea and vomiting may accompany the diarrhea. Symptoms usually start two to five days after exposure and last about one week.

*Campylobacter* infections may lead to hospitalization or other severe outcomes. People should call a doctor if they drank water from the Kennedy Creek watering point and are now experiencing the symptoms listed above.

4. What are the most common sources of *Campylobacter* outbreaks?

Poultry, raw milk, and untreated water are the most commonly identified sources of *Campylobacter* outbreaks in the United States. Regarding waterborne outbreaks, feces from domestic and wild animals can contaminate lakes and streams, including carriers showing no signs of illness.

5. Where is the Kennedy Creek watering point?

The Kennedy Creek watering point is located approximately one mile south of Paradise and within the Montana Department of Transportation highway right-of-way on railroad property. The watering point has been operational and used by the public as a drinking water source for

many decades, and is open access with no restriction. The Montana Department of Transportation posts signage indicating the water is not potable.

6. Is the Kennedy Creek watering point a spring?

No. Kennedy Creek flows both above and below ground from its source to the river. Flow is variable throughout the year, with spring runoff increasing surface water flow in certain areas. The collection point is a PVC pipe laying in the bottom of an open creek channel and held in place by rocks.

7. Is Kennedy Creek water safe to drink?

Sanders County advises against consuming water from this watering point. It is not considered to be a safe source of drinking water. There are multiple places where animals, insects, and other sources of contamination have direct access to water prior to the watering point.

8. Where can I get more information?

Sanders County is available to share information with the public. Please contact Karen Morey, 406-827-6925, or Shawn Sorenson, 406-827-6909.