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NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
Friday, June 8, 2001

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Utah Department of Health Urges Washing of All Melons to Avoid Salmonella

(Salt Lake City, UT) – Even though most people remove rind/skin/peel before eating a cantaloupe/melon or many fruits or vegetables, if not properly washed before cutting, it can pose a health risk by allowing Salmonella or other bacteria to reach the fruit. The Utah Department of Health (UDOH) is urging those who prepare melons, fruits and vegetables for others or themselves to follow practical safety guidelines.

The UDOH is currently investigating a cluster of 8 cases of Salmonella, which brings the state's year to date total to 85 cases. The majority of the cases do not appear to be linked. Preventing Salmonella is always on the minds of public health communicable disease managers because outbreaks can happen quickly. Last year, several outbreaks were reported involving 487 reported cases. The symptoms of Salmonella poisoning often include fever, abdominal cramps and diarrhea, which usually develop within one to three days after eating contaminated food. The bacteria can be life threatening to young children and elderly with compromised immune systems. The UDOH wants to especially urge those who care for the elderly and sick to be extra careful in following the safety guidelines.

Why the guidelines? Because cantaloupe has been implicated in many other outbreaks. Consumers are being warned to handle the product carefully. Because cantaloupes are grown on the ground, their rinds can become contaminated in the field by human or animal waste or while be distributed for sale.

Nationally, there has been several food borne outbreaks associated with cantaloupes and other melons with the most recent outbreak in California. Cases are also appearing in Arizona, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Tennessee and Washington which are related to the California outbreak.

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Another outbreak last spring was due to Salmonella and was associated with cantaloupe consumption in seven western states including Utah, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington) resulting in 43 cases of salmonella poisoning.

Concern is not limited to Salmonella and melons. E.coli 0157, hepatitis A, Cryptosporidium and Shigella can contaminate the outer surface of melons, fruits and vegetables. In previous years Utah public health officials have investigated outbreaks that included strawberries and raspberries, and of course, poultry products and eggs.

To prevent salmonella poisoning follow these food safety guidelines:

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before cutting melons.
- Before cutting melons, scrub the outer surface of the melon thoroughly with cool tap water and a clean produce brush to remove surface dirt.
- Wash all food-contact equipment and utensils that contact cut melons (cutting boards, knives) thoroughly with hot soapy water.
- Use a barrier such as gloves, deli paper or an appropriate utensil to touch cut melons. Do not touch cut melons with bare hands because you can transfer the bacteria to the fruit from your hands. If you do touch the melon with your bare hands, wash them.
- Maintain the temperature of the cut melons at 41 degrees or below; uncut melons do not need refrigeration.
- Cut melons should be consumed or discarded within seven days to avoid excessive microbial growth.
- Cut melons can go without refrigeration for four hours and then should be thrown away. Make a note of the time the cut melon was served.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after cutting or handling melons.

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