

Salmonella cases continue to rise

DENVER (AP) - Authorities handed out free bottled water to residents of Alamosa on Thursday after a salmonella outbreak linked to the city water system sickened dozens of people.

Town spokeswoman Connie Ricci said the number of confirmed salmonella cases rose to 47 in Alamosa, a community of 8,500 about 160 miles south of Denver. She said 76 other cases were under investigation.

Health officials said the tap water tested positive for bacteria that are believed to be salmonella, but they were still awaiting final test results for confirmation. The cause of the contamination was still under investigation.

Waterborne salmonella outbreaks are fairly rare, said Mark Salley, a spokesman for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. The bacteria are typically spread by food, he said.

Salmonella can cause diarrhea, fever and stomach pain. Victims typically recover on their own, but the elderly, infants and people with impaired immune systems may require treatment. Untreated, salmonella can cause death in vulnerable victims, the health department said.

Boiling the water for 15 seconds will kill the bacteria, or residents can use bottled water for brushing teeth, washing dishes, making ice, cooking, drinking and making baby formula, health officials said. People can use tap water to bathe, as long as they are careful not to ingest it, officials said.

City and county officials set up four centers where residents could get free bottled water or bring containers to fill with safe water, Ricci said. Residents were limited to one gallon per person per day. They could buy more at stores.

State emergency management officials activated an emergency operations center in the Denver suburb of Centennial to help coordinate deliveries of bottled water.

City officials plan to start flushing and disinfecting the water system in the next few days, a process that could take a week or more. While the flush is under way, no municipal water should be used, even if it is boiled, they said.

Mrs. Rivera's Kitchen, a downtown Alamosa restaurant, closed Wednesday when authorities issued the bottled water advisory but could reopen on Friday, Manager Timothy Rivera said.

"It takes a lot of manpower for all this stuff. We have to boil water for everything, to wash dishes," he said. "We have to have bottled water, we have to have ice. There's lots of things to take into consideration."

Last year, street construction kept tourists away from the restaurant, Rivera said.

"Now it's the water situation. Everything's not going too well in the valley," he said.

Authorities said the first salmonella victim began showing symptoms around March 8, and state health officials became aware of the outbreak Friday.

Officials tested city water on Monday, and the results showing bacteria in the water system came back Wednesday.