

## Mexican farm worker says he was told heart attack symptoms caused by 'too much chili'

'They don't treat workers like people here; they treat them like tractors or like animals'

By Yvette Brend, [CBC News](#) Posted: Aug 26, 2017 8:00 AM PT Last Updated: Sep 05, 2017 5:56 PM PT

A 50-year-old Mexican labourer who suffered heart damage while working 10-hour shifts for Canada's largest cranberry producer says a supervisor first blamed his symptoms on "too much chili."

Benito Meneses says it took nearly a week for staff at the farm in Richmond, B.C., to take his medical concerns seriously and take him to a hospital where he was eventually diagnosed with unstable angina.

However, his employer is disputing Meneses' version of the events, who, he says, has now returned to work with lighter duties on the farm.

Nevertheless, the seasonal worker, who currently earns \$10.85 per hour after working 13 seasons on B.C. farms, still [fears speaking out](#) could prevent him from getting work in Canada in the future but says he decided to tell his story in the wake of a 28-year-old farm worker's [recent death in Washington State](#).

"He's had enough. He says they [don't treat workers like people](#) here. They treat them like tractors or like animals," said Alejandro Lazzari, of the Migrant Workers' Dignity Association (MWDA), which [advocates for about 8,600 seasonal](#) farm workers in B.C.

## 'You Mexicans eat too much chili'

Meneses says he first felt pain on June 1 while doing strenuous labour in a boggy cranberry field

He was part of a three-man team running alongside a tractor and placing 35-kilogram planks in front of the wheels to prevent the machine from sinking as they laid drainage pipes.

That's when he felt the stab.

"A sudden, burning and encompassing pain. It was a sensation I had never felt in my entire life," said Meneses in WorkSafe documents.

"He explained his symptoms to a supervisor and he's told don't worry. That's a gastrointestinal issue, and that's because you Mexicans eat too much chili," said Lazzari of MWDA.

He said after days of weakness and vomiting he was then offered antacid by the supervisor who blamed his Mexican diet.

When the pain became unbearable he says he was given alternate jobs, such as cutting holes in pipes. But bending to do this task made symptoms worse until he was unable to work, he told CBC.

The head of MWDA — Raul Gatica — says he offered to take the Meneses to the hospital, and that's when the employer stepped in.

Six days after he says he first reported the "burning, persistent" chest pain to supervisors, Meneses was diagnosed with heart damage by a doctor at Ridge Meadows Hospital, according to medical records filed with WorkSafeBC.

Medical records indicated he had suffered from unstable angina from excessive and repetitive over-exertion at his work and he was treated with the insertion of a stent on June 9.

The condition robs the heart of blood and can lead to a heart attack, especially with too much exertion, medical documents say.

## Employer disputes timeline

Meneses's employer at Richberry Farms dispute his version of events and says he never told supervisors about his symptoms.

Peter Dhillon, CEO of Richberry Farming Groups, was travelling, but human resources staff at his company said the health and safety of workers is paramount at the company that has no previous fines or complaints.

A spokesperson for the farm said staff offered medical help as soon as he reported feeling ill from "indigestion" on June 5 and when he became unable to work a supervisor drove him to a clinic on June 7.

In the supervisor's response to the WorkSafeBC claim, she notes that medical records show that Meneses — a 10-year-smoker — had clogged blood vessels and should be checked for pre-existing health issues.

Meneses has applied for coverage from WorkSafeBC, but there is no ruling yet on whether his heart condition was caused by work.

Farm workers from Mexico are required to be [registered for provincial medical benefits](#) and insured by a private carrier, a cost they often pay.

## Kept working despite pain

In an interview with CBC News, Meneses said he didn't push hard enough to go to the hospital, as he feared he'd lose his job and be unable to support his large family in southern Mexico.

"I kept working because from the moment we sign up to be temporary foreign farm workers, the Mexican Secretariat of Labour and Consulate emphasize we are in Canada to work and not to complain, be sick or rest," said the tearful father of five.

Meneses is now back at work doing lighter labour and Richberry staff say he's welcome next season.

"We would be happy to employ him again next year, but this decision is not just ours to make. We must follow the requirements set forth by the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP)."

The farm also noted Meneses was invited back three previous seasons — from March to October — because he works so hard.

- [Temporary foreign worker program prone to abuse, Auditor General says](#)
- [B.C. wildfire smoke partly to blame for Washington state farm worker's death, say advocates](#)

The federal government told CBC that it is working to inform vulnerable temporary workers of their rights and increase onsite inspections.

No B.C. farms are currently ineligible for the worker program due to complaints.

Last year, the Mexican Consulate said it suspended nine farms and expelled two from the program for mistreatment of workers. This year, the consulate became aware of three "severe" health cases in which officials began "personally taking care" of the patients, and in specific instances, providing financial support.

"We stress to them that they cannot be fired for being sick and that they are fully covered," Hugo Velázquez Vázquez, told CBC in an email on Sept. 5.

WorkSafeBC declined comment on the case citing privacy issues.

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