

US: Hundreds sickened by contaminated food

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Reports of food-related outbreaks in the US have become a regular occurrence in the past few months, raising concerns about the safety of the food supply. Since September, officials from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have reported seven major outbreaks implicated in more than 1,100 cases of food poisoning, hundreds of hospitalizations, and at least three deaths.

Health officials in Indianapolis, Indiana, reported that at least 373 people became ill after eating at an Olive Garden restaurant December 15. The sickness was determined to have been caused by norovirus, a type of pathogen associated with fecal contamination, although the source of the contamination has yet to be specified.

Beginning in late November, an outbreak of *E. coli* sickened 71 people who had eaten at Taco Bell restaurants in five Northeastern states. Of these, 53 were hospitalized and 8 developed kidney failure. Meanwhile, 54 people in Iowa and Minnesota were reported ill from *E. coli* after eating at Taco John franchises.

At least 199 people in 26 states and Canada were sickened by bagged spinach contaminated with a virulent strain of *E. coli* bacteria in August and September. Also in September, at least four Americans and two Canadians were hospitalized and left paralyzed after consuming carrot juice that contained botulism toxin. In October and November, at least 400 people were sickened by salmonella-tainted tomatoes.

Food poisoning is excessively common in the US, although most cases go unreported. The CDC estimates that as many as 81 million cases of food-related illnesses occur each year, causing up to 9,000 deaths.

The incidence of illnesses from contaminated produce has more than doubled between 1998 and 2004, according to the non-profit Center for Science in the Public Interest. This increase is due to a number of factors. Most often cited by public and industry

officials are the wider distribution of fresh foods and more sensitive forensic data collection methods of the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

However, there are a number of other factors at work that far from signify an improvement in food safety. To the contrary, as the recent outbreaks demonstrate, the US population is increasingly exposed to the simplest and most preventable illnesses.

Perhaps most significantly, the US food and drug regulation system has to a large extent shifted in purpose—from regulating the food industry to ensuring industry access to consumer markets.

The proportion of the FDA's budget devoted to food safety programs, for instance, has declined by half since the 1970s. The *New York Times* reported December 11 that the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, the FDA's primary food safety program, had its budget decreased from \$48 million in 2003 to \$25 million in 2007. The number of full-time positions at the Center has fallen to 817 from 950 in three years. This is a miniscule number of people to oversee the massive food industry in the United States.

The FDA oversees all food products outside of meat, poultry, and eggs, which are regulated by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), or about 80 percent of the total US food supply. While the USDA conducts daily inspections at more than 9,000 meat-processing facilities, the FDA issues only voluntary guidelines for safe processing, and sends inspectors to food processing facilities on average only once every five to ten years.

Another factor that has increased the risk of food-related illness is the widespread use of antibiotics, steroids, and other chemicals in food production, which has stimulated the evolution of foodborne pathogens—including *E. coli*, salmonella, and botulinum—that are more virulent and resistant to anti-bacterial treatment.

A new analysis of nationwide industry poultry by *Consumer Reports* found that, of 525 fresh, whole broilers, 83 percent were found to harbor salmonella or the illness-causing campylobacter, up from 49 percent in just three years. Most of the bacteria found in the study were found to be resistant to at least one antibiotic, including those prescribed to treat infections in humans.

The poultry industry is notoriously unsanitary and brutal, and oversight is far from adequate, in spite of daily inspections. For poultry processing plants found by the USDA to exceed federal limits for salmonella, the report noted that the federal inspectors can order production suspended, but have no authority to levy fines or close plants. By USDA standards, a poultry processor exceeds the limits only if more than 12 out of 51 broilers inspected are contaminated with salmonella. In other words, the federally acceptable limit for contaminated chicken is around one in four.

Regarding *E. coli*, most of the recent outbreaks have been traced back to produce grown in the Salinas region of California, which is a center not only of produce production, but also livestock. It is thought that the *E. coli* infected the produce through waterways draining cattle-grazing areas.

E. coli comes in many different strains, only some of which are dangerous to humans. *E. coli* O157:H7, the strain responsible for the spinach outbreaks, is closely associated with the cattle industry. Large-scale ranch operations raise cows on diets high in grains and antibiotics rather than grasses in order to increase growth and minimize feeding costs. This tends to create an environment within the cows' stomachs for the selection of the more dangerous strains of *E. coli*, which are then transferred through the cows' feces into the local waterways. Dozens of peer-reviewed academic papers in the last decade have substantiated the correlation between the most commonly implicated *E. coli* strain, O157:H7, and inappropriate diets for ruminant animals.

The governmental response to the outbreaks has been revealing. In most cases, FDA officials announced that consumption of the suspect foods could be resumed before the specific source of the contamination had been pinpointed. Moreover, no fines or other punitive actions were suggested, let alone levied against producers whose products had caused suffering,

medical expense, and death. Rather, the FDA proposed financial incentives for errant companies to persuade them to adhere to the voluntary guidelines already in place.

In the event of outbreaks, neither the USDA nor the FDA has the authority to order mandatory recalls of tainted food. Rather, they must request companies to voluntarily recall food from the market. The response to a potential public health catastrophe is effectively limited to a supportive pat on the industry's back and an "all clear" signal to the public.



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