



# Food Safety *Fact Sheet*

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## FOODBORNE ILLNESS

**S**EEMS ALMOST EVERY WEEK brings news of the latest food contamination or foodborne illness outbreak. If you've ever gotten sick with "stomach flu," odds are you actually had food poisoning. Every year, one in six Americans gets sick and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases.<sup>1</sup> These figures are likely to be far higher, as most food-related sickness goes unreported. Such outbreaks also take a high financial toll on our economy. The estimated cost of foodborne illness to the nation tops \$77 billion annually.<sup>2</sup> The five most common pathogens causing foodborne illnesses resulting in hospitalizations are: salmonella, norovirus, Campylobacter, Toxoplasma gondii, and E. coli 0157. In 2011, 30 people died from eating cantaloupe contaminated with listeria in one of the largest such outbreaks ever.

2011 also saw the second largest meat recall in U.S. history—36 million pounds of ground turkey products distributed by Cargill Meat Solutions. One person died and 136 infections were reported in 24 states. Germany experienced the deadliest outbreak in recorded history in 2011, with 46 deaths and 3,910 confirmed cases of illness (many of them life-threatening) just from eating sprouts contaminated with a deadly E. coli strain.

### HOW DOES INDUSTRIALIZED FOOD CAUSE FOODBORNE ILLNESS?

Our industrialized food system is at the root cause of many of these outbreaks. Over-crowded factory farms where animals are raised under cruel conditions are often breeding grounds for infection where illnesses can easily spread. Indeed, the rise of pathogens in meat and other animal products has paralleled industry consolidation and the dominance of factory farm production. Even fruit and vegetable farms are at risk of contamination from nearby animal waste runoff.



Salmonella is commonly found in raw eggs, poultry, and meat. According to federal data, salmonella causes 40,000 illnesses each year, but the real figure may be at least 30 times that due to underreporting. Scientific evidence suggests that hens housed in crowded cages can increase the risk of salmonella infection in eggs.

Campylobacter is also an extremely common bacterium in chicken and other poultry products. One survey by Consumer Reports found a shocking two-thirds of chicken tested to be contaminated by either salmonella or campylobacter. The most common offenders were the brands Tyson and Foster Farms.<sup>3</sup>

Another common cause of contaminated food is unsanitary conditions at large facilities lacking proper oversight. In 2010, several massive Iowa egg facilities owned by the same company caused the largest recall ever—more than half a billion eggs. The company owner (Austin DeCoster, who later left the business) had a long history of safety violations. His operations were notorious for abuses to animals and workers alike. The contaminated eggs (apparently caused by a combination of over-crowding and sanitary violations) were distributed to 14 states under numerous brand names, making the recall especially challenging.

Massive operations distributing food widely can result in dangerous infections being rapidly spread across the nation. For example, Jensen Farms, the cantaloupe processor responsible for the deadly melon outbreak in 2011 spread listeria to 28 states in a matter of weeks. Also, the deadly E. coli 0157 bacteria is commonly found in ground meat products because of how easily the contaminant can be spread during processing. All it takes is for one sick cow to infect thousands of pounds of ground beef. The competitive drive towards consolidation and bigger facilities increases the risks of harm: the larger the processing facility, the more widespread (and potentially more deadly) the outbreak.

## HOW SAFE IS IMPORTED FOOD?

Despite America's abundance of farmland, we are increasingly relying on imported foods, presenting a huge safety risk. According to federal estimates, imported food accounts for 10-15 percent of all food consumed by U.S. households. That may not sound like a lot, except that nearly two-thirds of all produce and 80 percent of all seafood is imported. Moreover, imported food is expected to increase by 15 percent a year for the next several years.<sup>4</sup>

Many other countries don't have to conform to the same food safety standards that American producers do. While in theory imported food has to meet U.S. standards, the task of overseeing so much food flowing across our borders is daunting. The federal government doesn't have enough inspectors to properly oversee domestic food production, let alone imports. In 2010, the U.S. imported 2.4 million metric tons of seafood and more than 14 million metric tons of raw fruits and vegetables.

Numerous reports conclude that government agencies are falling down on the job, leaving our food supply at increasing risk. More than 90 percent of the imported produce and seafood rejected in border inspections was cited for presence of pathogens, illegal pesticides, chemicals, and other sanitary violations.<sup>5</sup>

An increasingly complex global supply chain complicates import safety further. In other words, while we may know which country a particular product comes from, we are less likely to know where that product's *ingredients* come from.

## LAX GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT

For decades, the U.S. food safety regulatory system has been stymied by inadequate legal authority, outdated safety standards, inadequate funding, and confusing overlapping jurisdiction between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Although the FDA is charged with more responsibility than USDA, the agency is much smaller and is allocated considerably less funding to do an increasingly complex job.

In an important first step toward rectifying this inadequate legal authority, the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA-enacted in 2011), was created to give the FDA additional legal authority to protect both domestic and imported foods through better oversight. Unfortunately, Congress has so far refused to allocate enough funds to allow the agency to adequately carry out the law.

USDA also has important food safety responsibility, mainly for meat and poultry products, but at times actually has less legal authority than FDA. For example, USDA has no mandatory recall authority. This means that in the wake of an outbreak, the agency can only ask the offending company to voluntarily recall its products. (FSMA expanded FDA's legal authority to allow for mandatory recalls.)

According to a 2011 report from the Government Accountability Office, federal food safety fragmentation "has caused inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and

inefficient uses of resources." While USDA and FDA have primary responsibility, 15 agencies administer 30 food-related laws. The GAO identified (as have many others) a single food safety agency—consolidating data collection, surveillance, and other functions—as an alternative solution.<sup>6</sup>

The Center for Food Safety supports a single federal food safety agency at the cabinet level. This agency should evaluate how best to regulate food production to prevent food safety hazards caused by large industrial agriculture operations while at the same time protect and support smaller, family, and diversified farms.

Our lax food safety system is no accident. Rather it's the result of decades of industry pressure to keep costly and pesky regulations to a minimum. Food lobbyists and other undue influence come in multiple forms. For example, on-site facility inspectors are under constant pressures not to report violations. In addition, major lobbying groups such as the American Meat Institute, the National Cattleman's Beef Association, and the United Egg Producers donate millions of dollars to targeted members of Congress to ensure the status quo.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) will require ongoing vigilance to ensure that FDA has the resources it needs to do the job. Also, federal regulations are a critical part of the policy-making process, which of course industry lobbyists are well aware of. States also play a key role both in oversight and surveillance. Cuts to state-level public health departments only further weaken our ability to prevent and stop outbreaks early on. Bigger picture changes in our industrialized food system are ultimately the key to prevention.

Here are a few actions you can take:

- 1) Ask your Congressman to increase funding to FDA to implement FSMA.
- 2) Ask your Congressman to support a single, cabinet-level food safety agency that has a public health focus to prevent dangerous outbreaks.
- 3) Ask your state representative to support state-level surveillance and other critical health department functions to identify and prevent outbreaks.
- 4) Buy from local, small, and organic food producers whenever possible.

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1 CDC Estimates of Foodborne Illnesses in the United States, page viewed January 25, 2012, <http://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/2011-foodborne-estimates.html>

2 Scharff RL, Economic burden from health losses due to foodborne illness in the United States, *J Food Prot.* 2012 Jan;75(1):123-31.

3 How safe is that chicken? *Consumer Reports*, January 2010, page viewed January 25, 2012, <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/magazine-archive/2010/january/food/chicken-safety/overview/chicken-safety-ov.htm>

4 Pathway to Global Product Safety and Quality, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, page viewed January 25, 2012, <http://www.fda.gov/downloads/AboutFDA/CentersOffices/OC/GlobalProductPathway/UCM259845.pdf>

5 Food Import Safety: Food Safety Modernization Act, page viewed January 25, 2012, [http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Produce\\_Safety\\_Project/FoodImportBrief.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Produce_Safety_Project/FoodImportBrief.pdf)

6 Federal Food Safety Oversight: Food Safety Working Group Is a Positive First Step but Governmentwide Planning Is Needed to Address Fragmentation, report to congressional committees, page viewed January 25, 2012, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d11289.pdf>.