



Terrorism and the Safety of Our Foods

Aurora Saulo Hodgson, Department of Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences

Members of any business sector in the USA would likely claim that focus on consumer safety and satisfaction is their top priority. Following the terrorist attacks of September 2001, however, many people feel a stronger need for safety in many areas, and food safety is not an exception.

With the available scientific expertise and technology, why are there still cases of foodborne illness?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that foodborne diseases cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths each year in the United States. Occurrences of foodborne illness remain because of several factors:

- A greater variety of foods is available, particularly seafoods and fresh fruits and vegetables, and many of these can now be purchased all year long, resulting in new concerns in transportation and refrigeration.
- The number of foods imported by the United States continues to increase, resulting in a corresponding increase in potential sources of contamination.
- The increasing time demand of work, school, and other obligations leads to less time for meal preparations in the home, so that more than fifty cents of every food dollar is now spent on food prepared outside the home.

To meet these conditions, there are more food handlers than before who can commit breaches in food safety and cause illness. At highest risk for foodborne illness are the immunocompromised individuals—the young, the elderly, pregnant women, and those who are sick—now comprising almost 25 percent of our population.

What is our government doing to make our food safer?

Our federal agencies with jurisdiction over food and water, such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), are collaborating with each other and with industry, at the state and local levels, to establish a more vigilant, nationwide mechanism to protect public health by adopting a risk-based philosophy founded on science-based knowledge and information. There are now newer federal surveillance systems, stronger prevention programs, and faster outbreak responses. Currently, we have scientific methods that can detect much smaller amounts of contamination than ever detected before and within a shorter period of time. Because of these factors, the American food supply remains among the safest in the world.

In particular, the FDA will increase the number of import inspectors and analysts to monitor and test imported food. The FDA is also seeking increased oversight of food in cases of emergency.

What can consumers do to protect themselves from food tampering and food contamination?

Each of us who handles food is responsible for its safety. When consumers buy food, it is their responsibility to check its integrity. Start with the packaging and make sure it is intact. There should be no dents, holes, leaks, or tears. Consumers should buy only canned foods with a concave top lid, or a lid button depressed downward. Check that tamper-evident seals, if present, are still intact. *If the integrity of food packaging is compromised, so is the safety of the food packed in it.*

Before using the food, check the appearance, color, and aroma. If there is any doubt, don't use it. If you suspect malicious tampering, report it to the FDA Consumer Complaint Coordinator (Hawaii office); John Cook, Food and Drug Administration; 300 Ala Moana Blvd., Rm 6-229, Honolulu, HI 96850; telephone 808 541 2662; e-mail <jcook@ora.fda.gov>.

Are there day-to-day food-handling practices to follow to help prevent foodborne illness?

Yes. Everyone should practice the basic tenets of food safety whenever food is prepared, displayed, and served—from the farm to restaurants to the home.

- Wash all raw foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, before serving and eating. Remember—there are no other food safety steps that will make these foods safer when served raw.
- Wash your hands with hot, soapy water before and after handling food. Wash your hands also after using the restroom and after activities that will contaminate your hands, such as handling the garbage and smoking.
- Avoid cross-contamination. Separate raw foods, especially meat, poultry, eggs, and seafood, from ready-to-eat foods, even while storing them in the refrigerator. Ready-to-eat foods should be stored covered and above raw foods.
- Cook food to the proper internal temperature to kill harmful microorganisms. Cook poultry and stuffing to 165°F food temperature; cook ground meats to

155°F; cook beef and pork steaks, pork chops, bacon, whole fish, and shell eggs to 145°F; hold the foods at these temperatures for at least 15 seconds.

- Stay away from the danger zone of 41–140°F. Foods should only stay in the danger zone for a total of 4 hours at most.

If contaminated food was eaten, should consumers take antibiotics?

No. Antibiotics should not be taken unless prescribed by a physician. Antibiotics are usually given to counter the effects of some bacterial contaminants, but they are not effective against viruses, chemicals, or radiological substances. If contaminated food was eaten, consult your physician immediately, and try to take along a secured sample of the contaminated food for examination.

Is it true that dietary supplements can prevent or treat anthrax?

At this time, no credible scientific evidence exists to indicate that currently available dietary supplements will prevent or treat anthrax. If you believe that you need anthrax treatment, you should consult your physician immediately.

Where can consumers go for additional information on food safety and terrorism?

For additional information on the Web and links to other sites, consult <<http://www.foodsafety.gov/~fsg/bioterr.html>>.