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Fearful of Fresh

Winston J. Craig

Andrews University, wcraig@andrews.edu

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One bacterium dividing every one-half hour can produce 17 million bacteria in just 12 hours.



E coli from animal manure is a major cause of food-borne illness.

Fearful of Fresh

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

We are accustomed to regularly hearing about large recalls of beef, chicken and turkey, meats that are commonly contaminated with *E coli*, *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella*. During the past 15 years, three out of every four outbreaks of the virulent *E coli* resulted from ground beef. In 2007, more than 400 tons of frozen ground beef were recalled due to a major outbreak of *E coli* O157:H7 contamination.

Recently, some fruits and vegetables have shown up with problems. Some are asking, "Just how safe is our food?" In 2006, an outbreak of *E coli* O157:H7 from contaminated spinach sickened more than 200 people across Canada and the U.S., 103 were hospitalized and three died. The ready-to-eat, triple-washed spinach from farms in California produced bloody diarrhea, permanent kidney damage, seizures or permanent nerve damage in those who ate the spinach which had been contaminated by animal manure from a nearby farm. Most of the lettuce, cabbage, arugula, kale, spinach and endive come from California and Arizona where



new rules have now been put into place to protect the consumer. Greater vigilance is required to prevent wild animals from getting access to fields where food is grown and to prevent water from draining from animal pastures to farm crops.

In the summer of 2008, more than 1,400 cases of *Salmonella* poisoning occurred in 43 states, and two persons died in a major U.S. food-borne outbreak. The outbreak was first attributed to raw tomatoes, but later to raw jalapeno or Serrano peppers transported from Tamaulipas state in N.E. Mexico. Authorities found that a rare strain of *Salmonella* contaminated the water used to wash the peppers before shipment to the U.S. There are more than 200,000 facilities outside the U.S. that produce food for the U.S. market, and

the FDA inspects only about 100 facilities per year. Since these outbreaks, more inspectors have been employed by the FDA.

Food-borne illnesses most commonly target the young, the very old, pregnant women and transplant patients. Since these groups typically have a compromised immune system, they should avoid raw sprouts and any juice or beverage that has not been pasteurized.

Following some basic food handling rules will help protect all consumers. Most leftovers should be stored in the refrigerator no longer than three to four days. Fresh cut produce, such as bagged salad greens, should be purchased only if refrigerated. Firm produce like cucumbers and cantaloupes can be scrubbed with a clean brush. A number of fruit and vegetable washes are available to help provide cleaner produce. Fruits and vegetables should be washed under running water just before cutting, cooking and eating. Hands should be washed with warm water and soap for 20–30 seconds before preparing any food.

Fortunately, for the consumer, companies have become more vigilant in doing self inspections and putting in place a quality control system to better detect contamination in fresh produce before it can spread.

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Winston Craig, Ph.D., RD, is a professor of nutrition at Andrews University.