

Even before tomato warning, many Americans lacked confidence in the food safety system

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A new national study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health Project on the Public and Biological Security finds that, in spite of a number of food safety incidents in recent years, most Americans remain confident that the food produced in the United States is safe. However, many have concerns about the safety of imported food produced in some other countries. They also do not have high levels of confidence in parts of the U.S. food safety system and some of the organizations involved.

The poll found that a majority of Americans believe that the food produced in the U.S. is either very (37%) or somewhat (58%) safe. Only 4% thought US-produced foods were unsafe. When asked about foods available in the U.S. but produced in other countries, fewer than one in ten (6%) considered foods from Canada to be unsafe. In contrast, almost half of Americans (47%) thought food from Mexico was unsafe, and 56% thought this about food from China. Possibly responding to these concerns, about half (53%) of Americans reported at least sometimes looking for information about what countries foods come from when shopping for groceries.

Although most American see U.S.-produced food as relatively safe, they do have some reservations about the groups involved in food production and provision. Majorities have only some or very little confidence in meat producers (58%) or restaurants (55%) to keep food safe, while substantial minorities say this about grocery stores (41%) and fruit and

vegetable growers (39%). In addition, Americans have some concerns about the government food inspection system: 52% have only some or very little confidence in the inspection system to keep food safe.

"With growing globalization of the food supply, Americans are likely to worry more about the safety of the food they eat. At the moment, many are not confident that the system for protecting their food is working as well as it should," said Robert J. Blendon, professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Over a third of Americans (38%) worry about getting ill from the food they eat. Concern was greater among certain groups: Hispanics (55%) and African-Americans (46%) were more likely than whites (32%) to be worried, and women (45%) were more likely than men (30%).

The poll also found high levels of awareness of the major food recalls that have occurred in recent years. Nine in ten Americans had heard about food being recalled in the last two years.* About eight in ten (82%) specifically remember the ground beef recall, 74% the spinach recall, and 55% the peanut butter recall. Of those who remembered at least one of these recalls, eight in ten (80%) avoided eating the food involved in the recall, about half (52%) contacted relatives or friends to make sure they knew about the recall, and 39% searched for further information about the recall. In addition to protecting themselves during food recalls, Americans take action to protect themselves from potentially unsafe food when eating out. Of the 59% of Americans who ever read restaurant inspection notices in their local newspapers, 88% reported they avoid those restaurants that have been cited for violations. At home, a majority of Americans (86%) attempt to reduce the risk from food-borne illness by often washing fruits and vegetables.

The poll, conducted before the recent FDA warning about the salmonella threat posed by some fresh tomatoes, found that a substantial proportion

of Americans know what salmonella is and worry about it. About six in ten (62%) reported that they knew what salmonella was, and almost four in ten (37%) were worried that they or a family member might become ill from it in the next year. African-Americans (43%) and Hispanics (45%) were more likely than whites (32%) to be worried. Women (40%) were more likely to be worried than men (33%).

"Even before the FDA issued the recent warning about fresh tomatoes contaminated with salmonella, a large number of Americans knew about the threat of salmonella to food safety and were specifically worried about it," said Blendon. "This indicates that the recent outbreak is likely to be of serious concern to many people."

In addition, large numbers reported knowing about other specific types of food-borne illness: 62% said they knew what E. coli was, 58% mad cow, and 47% botulism. Almost four in ten (37%) were worried that they or a family member might become ill from E. coli in the next year, 27% about mad cow disease, and 20% about botulism. There was some confusion over the role that cooking food might play in protecting people from becoming sick from food-borne illnesses. While majorities knew that cooking food thoroughly would protect against salmonella (68%) and E. coli (61%), 41% of respondents incorrectly believed that cooking could protect against botulism, and a third that cooking could protect against mad cow (32%).

Some aspects of the food system are perceived by Americans to be less safe than others. When asked about some of the places where they might get their food, strong majorities of Americans considered food to be at least somewhat risky if it came from street vendors and pushcarts (88%), buffet restaurants (76%), salad bars (74%) or fast food restaurants (72%), while food from school cafeterias (48%), home kitchens (44%), or farmer's markets (44%) were considered risky by the lowest number of Americans. As for particular foods that might pose safety concerns,

those perceived by the largest numbers to be at least somewhat risky were raw fish or sushi (82%) and hamburgers cooked rare or medium rare (80%), while those perceived by the lowest numbers to be risky were raw fruits and vegetables (36%), bean or alfalfa sprouts (36%), milk and cheese products (35%), and infant formula (35%).

"For many Americans, the outbreak of salmonella from tomatoes will be regarded as an unusual threat, because they generally do not see eating fruits and vegetables as risky," said Blendon.

Source: Harvard School of Public Health

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