

# Study: Public Perceptions and the Salmonella Outbreak of 2008

January 29 2009

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Salmonella Saintpaul bacteria (dark red)

(PhysOrg.com) -- Researchers at the Rutgers Food Policy Institute (FPI) have investigated public perceptions of the 2008 Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak, the largest foodborne illness outbreak in the United States in over a decade.

The outbreak, originally believed to have been caused by the consumption of certain types of fresh tomatoes, sickened more than 1,400 individuals in 43 states. It was ultimately linked to fresh jalapeño and serrano peppers from Mexico. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a series of advisories to consumers to avoid eating certain types of tomatoes and peppers.

All the media attention and the complexity of the government's messages provided an opportunity for Rutgers researchers to study the public's understanding of the FDA's advisories and other communications. The results of this study are posted on FPI's web site.

The survey found that awareness of the Salmonella outbreak this summer was high, but the specifics were less well understood. While 93 percent of respondents were aware that tomatoes were believed to be the source, only 68 percent were aware that peppers were also associated with the outbreak. The majority (66 percent) first heard about the advisory on television, and a small minority (8 percent) first heard about it from restaurants and retailers. There was significant uncertainty about the specifics of the warning. Nearly half of those aware of the tomato warning were not certain which types of tomatoes were considered unsafe.

FDA had advised Americans that they need not avoid all tomatoes, and 64 percent of those aware of the warning and who ate tomatoes prior to the warning continued to eat tomatoes during the advisory. However, not everyone followed the FDA's advice. Eleven percent of all respondents reported knowingly eating the types of tomatoes the FDA had warned them not to eat. The most common reasons respondents gave for doing this were the belief that eating the tomatoes would not cause illness; a distrust of the government and/or media; the belief that stores wouldn't sell unsafe products; and that consumers had done something to the tomatoes to make them safe (such as washing or cooking them, which were not recommended by FDA).

The tomato warning had been lifted by the time researchers conducted the phone interviews for this report. Two-thirds of respondents were aware of this. However, one-third said they were not aware, making it is clear that the message that tomatoes were once again considered safe to eat had not reached all consumers. Finally, nearly three-quarters of those

who had heard of the warning and were tomato consumers before the outbreak reported that they had eaten tomatoes since the warning had been lifted.

These results are based on a nationally representative sample of 1,101 Americans, interviewed by telephone from Aug. 4 to Sept. 24, 2008.

Provided by Rutgers Food Policy Institute

Citation: Study: Public Perceptions and the Salmonella Outbreak of 2008 (2009, January 29)  
retrieved 2 May 2024 from  
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-01-perceptions-salmonella-outbreak.html>

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