

New study finds confidence in food safety plunges in wake of peanut butter contamination

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Fewer than one in four consumers now believe the U.S. food supply is safer than it was a year ago, according to new data from the University of Minnesota's Food Industry Center.

After January's national salmonella outbreak, just 22.5 percent of consumers in the study said they were confident the food supply is safer than a year ago, the lowest reading since the study began in May 2008. Eight people died and more than 500 have become ill in the most recent outbreak, which may have originated in a Georgia peanut plant and spread through peanut-butter products sold nationwide.

The drop in confidence mirrors a similar drop last June, when a salmonella outbreak later traced to jalapeno peppers sickened nearly 1,500 people. The study involves continuously tracking consumer confidence in food supply safety via a weekly online survey of about 175 consumers from across the nation. The consumers are selected each week by a national market research company.

Several measures are being collected on an ongoing basis to monitor consumer concerns, expectations and perceptions of the safety of the food supply from natural/accidental contamination, and the defense of the food supply from deliberate contamination from an act of terrorism. These measures soon will be used to develop a composite food confidence indicator similar to the Consumer Sentiment Index that

measures overall consumer confidence.

The indicator is unique because of its continuous tracking feature, said Jean Kinsey, director of the Food Industry Center. Consumers' response to food-borne illnesses and recalls helps inform the design of food safety strategies and regulations, and consumer confidence "is critical to their peace of mind as well as to the economic health of the entire food industry."

The ongoing study is conducted jointly with the Louisiana State University AgCenter and is funded by the National Center for Food Protection and Defense.

Source: University of Minnesota

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