

Salmonella outbreak: What you need to know

February 2 2009, By Bob Lamendola

Consumers must remain vigilant about tossing salmonella-tainted peanut products found during a recent outbreak, food safety experts said. A few more people get sick every week. More than 400 products have been recalled, and more products are recalled daily. And last week, the Georgia factory blamed for the outbreak recalled every product made since January 2007, so more items may be pulled from store shelves in coming weeks.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and food safety experts recommend consumers be cautious and skip many foods made with peanuts. Major-label whole nuts and peanut butter sold by the jar are safe. The risk involves foods made with processed peanuts, such as crackers, cookies, ice cream, cereal and candy.

"We don't know the full extent of this outbreak yet," said Keith Schneider, a University of Florida food safety expert. "Until it begins to wane, I would suggest erring on the side of caution. Especially with the four high-risk groups: the elderly, children under 5, people with (weak) immune systems and pregnant women."

How widespread is this outbreak?

More than 525 people, half of them children, have been stricken since August with salmonella typhimurium, the bacteria found in tainted peanut products made by Peanut Corp. of America in Blakely, Ga. At least 116 were hospitalized and eight died.

Because peanut butter and paste is used to make so many foods, the number of recalled items and the total bulk recalled may wind up being the largest in history. Initially, the plant recalled items made from 33 million pounds of peanuts; the expanded recall could be three times as large.

"Has most of it been consumed? Probably. Or is it in some broker's warehouse? Some of these products have a (two-year) shelf life," said Seattle attorney Bill Marler, who specializes in food poisoning lawsuits and has become a food-safety expert.

How serious is salmonella?

The family of bacteria typically infects people via food contaminated by fecal bacteria. The germ causes diarrhea, fever, nausea and vomiting, and can spread into the bloodstream to become dangerous. Outbreaks have been caused by tainted tomatoes, sprouts and meats.

The CDC pegs salmonella as the third most common food-borne illness, with almost 2 million cases per year. In most cases, people have the runs for a day or two, then recover. About one-quarter go to the hospital; fewer than 1 percent die. The CDC says 38 infections go undetected for every one reported.

What products have been recalled?

The potentially contaminated food was sold in bulk, in tubs of peanut butter for nursing homes and other institutions, and to 70 firms that make peanut products.

Some familiar names on the recall list: General Mills, Austin crackers, Famous Amos cookies, Keebler, Little Debbie, Nutrisystem, Jenny Craig and Walmart.

How much came to Florida? No one knows. Publix and its Greenwise stores reported that 39 of the recalled products were removed from shelves, including six snacks under its own labels. Winn-Dixie did not respond to questions.

What happened at the plant?

The Food and Drug Administration this week reported that 12 times in 2007 and 2008, Peanut Corp. found salmonella in products but shipped them anyway after a retest found no contamination. The company did not clean the machinery that made the tainted food.

This month, FDA inspectors found a roof leaking into the food area, and pests. Also, a load of chopped peanuts were found contaminated with metal fragments and a "filthy, putrid or decomposed" substance. Federal officials said Friday they had opened a criminal investigation of the company.

Why didn't anyone catch this?

Some advocates say the FDA has failed in safeguarding the food supply. The agency lacks money and manpower and must rely on states and outside firms to monitor food plants, said Patty Lovera, assistant director of the advocacy group Food & Water Watch. The PCA plant had not been visited since 2006.

Schneider said blame lies with the FDA, states and Congress. But he said this outbreak and one in 2007 should pressure the FDA and the industry to test peanut products more often.

How worried should you be?

Not too worried, Schneider said. Tens of millions of people eat peanut

products every day without getting sick, so the risk of infection was tiny, he said.

An estimated half of the chicken sold in this country carries salmonella or campylobacter bacteria but is made safe by cooking, Schneider said. A simple rule: Cook all food to an internal temperature of 145 degrees and set your refrigerator at 41 degrees or colder.

"You can't say any food is completely safe," Schneider said. "There's an inherent risk in eating. But the odds of getting very sick are very low."

An estimated 76 million Americans get food poisoning each year, and 5,000 die each year. Most common: norovirus.

MORE INFORMATION

The CDC at cdc.gov or 800-232-4636. The FDA at fda.gov or 888-463-6332. For an FDA list of recalled products, click on "recall of peanut-containing products." For a list of products deemed to be safe, see the American Peanut Council at peanutsusa.com.

ONLINE

Search for peanut butter product recalls at SunSentinel.com/salmonella

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