

CDC: US food poisoning cases held steady in 2008

April 9 2009, By MIKE STOBBE , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- Americans didn't suffer more food poisoning last year despite high-profile outbreaks involving peppers, peanut butter and other foods, according to a government report released Thursday.

Rates of food-borne illnesses have been holding steady for five years. They had been declining from the mid-1990s until the beginning of this decade, due mainly to improvements in the [meat](#) and [poultry](#) industry, some experts say.

But produce-associated food poisonings have been increasing, and the nation is no longer whittling down food-borne disease, government officials said.

"Progress has plateaued," said Dr. Robert Tauxe of the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control](#) and Prevention, a co-author of the report.

The report looks at the occurrence of about ten leading food-borne illnesses in ten states that participate in a federally-funded [food poisoning](#) monitoring system. CDC officials believe it's nationally representative, based on the sample's mix of geography and demographics.

The research appears in this week's issue of a CDC publication, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

Salmonella remained the most common cause of food poisoning,

triggering more than 7,400 lab-confirmed illnesses in those states. That translates to a rate of about 16 cases for every 100,000 people. There has been no significant change in the salmonella rate in recent years, CDC officials said.

Campylobacter and shigella, two kinds of bacterial infections, were the second and third most common food-borne illnesses, occurring at rates of about 13 and 7 per 100,000, respectively.

The researchers don't address how many people died.

Experts say the report's numbers are lower than reality because only a fraction of food poisoning cases get reported or confirmed by laboratories.

An estimated 87 million cases of food-borne illness occur in the United States each year, including 371,000 hospitalizations and 5,700 deaths, according to an Associated Press calculation that used the CDC formula and current population estimates.

There were geographic variations in disease rates among the states, the CDC found. The highest rates of salmonella occurred in Georgia and New Mexico, campylobacter was most common in California and E. coli thrived best in Colorado.

Those variations were no doubt influenced by some specific outbreaks that caused more illnesses in some states than others, said Elliot Ryser, a professor of food science at Michigan State University.

Prominent food-borne illness outbreaks in 2008 included:

-A [salmonella outbreak](#) linked to hot peppers and tomatoes from Mexico that sickened more 1,400 Americans. It was the nation's largest outbreak

of food-borne illness in a decade, and was first identified in New Mexico and Texas.

-A peanut-related salmonella outbreak - which started last year - caused at least 690 confirmed illnesses in 46 states and was linked to nine deaths.

-A salmonella outbreak attributed to Honduran cantaloupes sickened 51 people in 16 states.

Better testing and surveillance has improved the government's ability to detect food-borne disease outbreaks, Ryser said.

Outbreaks account for just a fraction of cases in the ten states last year, however. For example, only 7 percent of the salmonella cases were tied to identified outbreaks, the CDC report said.

The food supply is safer today than it was 50 or 100 years ago, thanks to advances like pasteurization and cleaner water, said Tauxe, deputy director of the CDC's Division of Foodborne, Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases.

But to the public, food poisoning may seem to be getting worse because of large outbreaks in the last several years, experts say.

That's due in part to better testing and surveillance that have improved the government's ability to detect multistate outbreaks. Other factors: Food poisoning is occurring in certain foods - like peanut butter - that in the past were not thought to be a risk. And government and company inspectors have at times failed to protect consumers from contamination in food processing plants.

Government investigators and food industry officials have been under

increasing pressure to fix what is perceived as a broken food system. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has hired more than 150 additional inspectors and more than 30 additional scientists and consumer safety officers in the past year, FDA officials said during a Thursday teleconference with reporters.

On the Net:

The CDC publication: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr>

(This version CORRECTS number of years that illness rates have held steady.)

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