

When good food goes bad: New report focuses on strengthening US response to illness outbreaks

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The Center for Biosecurity of UPMC today released online ahead of print a new report, *When Good Food Goes Bad: Strengthening the US Response to Foodborne Disease Outbreaks*. The authors analyzed existing data and studies on foodborne illness outbreak response, identified emerging trends, and interviewed dozens of federal and state-level officials and experts from industry, professional organizations, academia, and relevant international organizations. The report puts forth a series of recommendations to accelerate and strengthen responses to foodborne illness outbreaks in the US.

Last year, the US was hit with one of the deadliest foodborne illness outbreaks in recent memory when contaminated cantaloupe sickened more than a hundred people and killed dozens. The contamination was eventually traced to fruit from a single processing plant, but in addition to the illness and death that resulted, the entire cantaloupe industry was affected when the price of cantaloupes dropped by more than 30% nationwide as consumer fear drove down demand.

Each year more than 40 million Americans become sick with foodborne infections. Among those who become ill, 128,000 will be hospitalized and 3,000 will die. Foodborne illness also takes a toll on our economy: Every year the US loses more than \$77 billion in lost productivity by people who become sick, in addition to the [economic impact](#) a foodborne illness outbreak has on the affected industry.

Much effort has gone into preventing foodborne illness outbreaks. In 2010, the [Food Safety Management Act](#) was passed, and, although it has not yet been fully funded or implemented, it focuses federal efforts on preventing contamination of food supply.

But even with more and better prevention efforts, it is economically, politically, and scientifically difficult to guarantee 100% protection of the US food supply. Thus, the authors of this report argue, we need to increase our focus on improving the speed and accuracy with which we detect and respond to outbreaks.

"The sooner the source of an outbreak is identified, the sooner we can issue accurate targeted warnings and take the contaminated products off the shelves," notes Jennifer Nuzzo, author of the report. "And the sooner people stop eating contaminated food, the sooner the sickness stops."

Once protective actions are implemented, additional illness and death, as well as economic tolls, can be minimized. The report recommends several actions, including:

- Bolster the public health departments that conduct outbreak investigations so that they have the tools and people they need to detect outbreaks, quickly identify the source, and issue targeted warnings. When public health departments are able to quickly solve outbreaks, it saves lives.
- Tap the expertise of the private sector to help us solve outbreaks. The US [food supply](#) is becoming increasingly complex, and as a result outbreaks are becoming more difficult to solve. We need to find ways of soliciting expertise from the people who know how production and distribution systems are organized and use that to inform [public health](#) investigations of outbreaks.
- Develop technologies to ensure that our national foodborne

illness surveillance programs stay up to date and relevant.

The report, *When Good Food Goes Bad: Strengthening the US Response to Foodborne [Disease Outbreaks](#)*, appears on the Center's website at [biosecurity.org/" target="_blank">www.upmc-biosecurity.org/](#).

Provided by Center for Biosecurity of UPMC

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