

FDA: Imported spices have double salmonella risk

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says that almost 7 percent of imported spices over a three-year period were contaminated with salmonella.

In a report released Wednesday, the FDA says testing of imported spices between 2007 and 2010 showed that spices were twice as likely as other inspected foods to be contaminated with the pathogen. More than 80 different types of salmonella were detected.

The agency decided to study the issue as several spice-related outbreaks have caused illnesses around the globe. In 2009 and 2010, black pepper and red pepper from India, Vietnam and China used in salami caused hundreds of illnesses. The FDA says there have been 14 known outbreaks around the world since 1973, causing almost 2,000 illnesses, many of which were in children.

The FDA, which monitors food and drug safety for American consumers, says that during the three year period, 749 shipments of spice were refused entry into the United States because of salmonella contamination while 238 other shipments were denied because of the presence of what the FDA calls "filth"—insects, excrement, hair or other materials.

The agency said that some of the spices that were found contaminated at the border were later cooked or treated to eliminate possible pathogens, so much of the salmonella was likely gone by the time the spices were

eaten. The agency also noted that the amount of spice generally eaten at a meal is small, meaning people have less of a chance of getting sick from a contaminated spice than a contaminated fruit or vegetable, for example.

Still, the agency has targeted spices because their route to a diner's plate is so circuitous and the potential for contamination comes at many different points. Most all of the spices eaten in the United States are imported, and most come from small farms in a variety of countries that all have different levels of food safety oversight.

The report says spices are produced by a wide variety of agricultural practices, including "on very small farms where farm animals are used to plow, crops are harvested by hand, and spices are dried in open air." All of these practices have potential for animal, bird or human contamination. Off the farm, spices from the small farms are often combined, sold to exchanges or packing companies, or stored for years, increasing the chances that they are temporarily in unclean circumstances.

The study looked at spices imported from several countries, with many of the shipments coming from India, Mexico, Thailand and Vietnam.

Michael Taylor, FDA's deputy commissioner for foods, says the agency is "not recommending that consumers stay away from spices," though the chances of someone getting sick can be reduced by adding spices to food before it is cooked.

Taylor says that new food safety rules that aim to make imported and domestic food safer on farms and in processing facilities should help reduce spice contamination. Those rules include regulations that will require food importers to better understand where the food they bring into the country has been.

According to the study, much of the knowledge and technology to reduce contamination exist but are often not used. It surmised that problems arose because of generally unhygienic conditions, including the failure to limit animal and insect access to food and not taking steps like irradiation to kill any potential pathogens.

The report said that better training across the spice supply chain would be one way to reduce illnesses.

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