

Is food getting safer?

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With all the headlines about foodborne illness in recent years, it might seem that the problem of food contamination is at epic levels. Most recently, poultry contaminated with *Salmonella* sickened close to 300 people across 18 states, while more than 600 people in 25 states developed *Cyclospora* infection linked to prepackaged salad greens and cilantro. Before that, a multistate outbreak of hepatitis A infection affecting more than 160 people was linked to an organic frozen berry and pomegranate mix.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which tracks 15 percent of the population through its FoodNet program, confirmed more than 19,000 infections, 4,500 hospitalizations and 68 deaths related to tainted food in 2012 (statistics for 2013 are not available yet). Other

foods—from ground beef and deli turkey to cucumbers, mangoes, cantaloupe and peanut butter—have also been implicated in [outbreaks](#) in the last few years.

A recent study from the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) had some encouraging news: Using data collected by the CDC and other sources, it found that outbreaks of foodborne illness from Salmonella, E. coli, and other pathogens decreased by more than 40 percent overall between 2001 and 2010. This downward trend is, at least in part, due to improved [food safety](#) practices implemented by the meat, poultry and seafood industries, which saw the greatest declines in outbreaks.

Tainted numbers?

But before you go back to eating rare burgers, the news may not be as rosy as it appears. For one thing, millions of cases of foodborne illness go unreported every year, since most people don't see a [health care provider](#) when they have stomach woes and don't even realize that food may be to blame. And cases that do get reported may not be fully investigated, CSPI notes, because of underfunding and understaffing of state health departments, made worse by the recent recession. Not all states have to notify the CDC of all outbreaks of foodborne illness. In fact, the CDC estimates that the true incidence of foodborne illness is closer to 48 million cases (one in six Americans) a year, with 3,000 deaths.

Moreover, the decline in reported outbreaks was not equal across the board: Illnesses related to seafood, beef, pork and poultry steadily decreased, while those related to produce remained about the same over the decade. And the number of outbreaks related to dairy—though relatively low—rose to its highest level in 2010, perhaps due to the growing popularity of raw (unpasteurized) [milk products](#), which are

more likely to harbor dangerous bacteria.

Keep in mind, too, that even if foodborne illnesses are on the decline, antibiotic-resistant "superbugs" in meat are on the rise, as noted by another recent report, from the Environmental Working Group, which was based on government tests of raw meats from 2011. For example, 26 percent of raw chicken pieces harbored a resistant version of *Campylobacter jejuni*, while 10 percent of raw ground turkey had a resistant form of *Salmonella*. Antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which cause [foodborne illnesses](#) that are more difficult to treat, have developed largely because of the overuse of antibiotics in industrial livestock operations; the drugs are given to promote growth and prevent infections that are common in overcrowded factory farms.

An action plan

Foodborne illness remains "a pressing public health concern," says CSPI. And while large-scale outbreaks tend to make national headlines, nearly 20 percent of all cases occur at home. New federal regulations for egg production went into full effect last year, while the Food Safety Modernization Act, signed into law in 2011, gives the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) greater authority to regulate both domestic and imported foods. This should improve the safety of the nation's food supply—if these programs get the needed funding and resources (and that's a big if).

Meanwhile, you can do a lot to protect yourself from foodborne illness. Some key steps are to wash your hands before and after handling food (particularly after handling raw meats and poultry); keep utensils and surfaces clean; cook meat and poultry to safe temperatures; keep [raw meats](#) separate from cooked meats and other foods; chill foods promptly; and reheat foods to proper temperatures. Scrub produce well. Whether eating at home or in restaurants, make sure hot food is served hot and

cold food, cold. No one should consume raw milk products, especially children, pregnant women and anyone with impaired immunity. And don't assume that organic foods are safer from contamination than conventionally grown ones—they're not. For more about [food](#) safety, go to www.foodsafety.gov.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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