

Hormel recalls Planters peanuts and mixed nuts due to possible contamination with deadly listeria

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Testing of peanut products leads to fears of possible listeria contamination and recalls in five states. Credit: Planters

Hormel Foods' recall of two Planters peanut and mixed nuts products at

two retailers in five states due to possible contamination with potentially deadly listeria doesn't surprise Northeastern University food policy expert Darin Detwiler.

He says peanuts are at particular risk of being contaminated with the food-borne bacteria that causes listeria due to the way they are harvested, handled and stored.

But Detwiler, an associate teaching professor, says recalls could be reduced if producers delayed shipping [peanut](#) products until they received the results of safety testing for contaminants such as listeria.

As it is, he says, the products are shipped off to distribution centers and then to stores, where unsuspecting customers may purchase peanuts and other nuts later subject to recalls.

Listeria can be lethal

The stakes are high.

Healthy people may suffer the temporary discomfort of a high fever, [severe headache](#), stillness, nausea, [stomach pain](#) and diarrhea, the FDA says.

But infections from [listeria monocytogenes](#) can be serious and even fatal in young children, frail or [elderly people](#) and those with weakened immune systems.

It is also known to cause stillbirths and miscarriages, Detwiler says.

The [FDA](#) says Hormel is voluntarily recalling 4-ounce packages of Planters Honey Roasted Peanuts and 8.75-ounce cans of Planters Deluxe Lightly Salted Mixed Nuts produced at one of its facilities in April.

They were shipped to Publix distribution warehouses in Florida, Georgia, Alabama and North Carolina, and to Dollar Tree distribution warehouses in South Carolina and Georgia.

The [FDA site lists](#) the UPC and use by dates of the recalled products so consumers can discard or return them—if they haven't already consumed them.

Listeria on site

"Not every peanut (in the recall) is contaminated," Detwiler says.

But he says the recall means "a sample from a lot or batch number was taken and it was shown to be contaminated."

Peanuts are easily contaminated by the pathogens that cause listeria and also salmonella, Detwiler says.

"They are harvested and handled in various environments where they can come into contact with contaminated soil and contaminated water. Even minimal exposure can lead to the introduction of pathogens."

"A lot of these peanuts are stored in massive mountains" where they may come into contact with animal droppings, he said.

"Most nuts go through various processes—shelling, roasting, packaging—so there are many stages where contamination may occur. There could be contamination of the processing facilities and equipment," Detwiler says.

And since many of the peanut and nut products are eaten raw, "there's no kill step to kill these pathogens."

"We've had multiple outbreaks with peanuts," including one about 15 years ago that resulted in more than 700 known illnesses and nine deaths, Detwiler says.

While there have been no reported cases of listeria associated with the current recall, Detwiler says "peanut (associated disease) outbreaks are some of the biggest outbreaks that are out there."

Why not wait for safety test results?

Unlike [meat products](#), which are inspected almost constantly by the USDA, peanuts are usually inspected by state officials, and not all that frequently, Detwiler says.

But he says recalls, illnesses and even deaths could be reduced by adding an additional step to the inspection process, which is having producers wait for results of testing for food-borne contaminants to come in before shipping the products to food warehouse distribution centers.

"Fresh peanuts have a very long lifespan. I know of no reason why peanut companies are not required to hold on to a product to verify that it was tested as being safe before shipping out for commerce," Detwiler says. "There really is no reason."

The risk of miscarriage

"When we talk about the average healthy person, listeria is an inconvenience. 'I have to miss a day of work.' 'I got a stomach bug,'" Detwiler says.

But listeria poses more severe risks for very [young children](#) as well as the very old, who might be relying on soft peanut butter as a source of

protein, he says.

Pregnant women are disproportionately affected by listeria, Detwiler says.

He knows of many cases in which "the mother got sick and she recovered but she lost her fetus. We're talking about stillbirth, premature delivery and also severe infection in the newborn."

"Every time I talk to these women they say, 'I thought I was doing something healthy.' It's just so sad."

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