

As ongoing listeria outbreak claims nine lives; expert explains why food recalls are on the rise

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Credit: Federico Arnaboldi from Pexels

Federal agencies have announced one food recall after another in recent weeks, with the most serious involving an 18-state outbreak of listeria

from deli meat that has killed nine people as of Aug. 29.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the bacterial infections linked to Boar's Head meat sliced at the deli is the largest outbreak of listeria since a 2011 outbreak tied to cantaloupe.

But recent weeks have also seen [recalls of Great Value Apple Juice](#) sold at Walmart for elevated arsenic levels; Palmer candies and snacks sold at Target and Walmart due to the risk of salmonella; and various types of vegetables from The Weirs Farm sold at Kroger and Aldi stores across multiple states due to potential for listeria contamination.

Darin Detwiler, a teaching associate professor at Northeastern and national food policy expert, attributes the cases to better reporting but also breaks in the food safety chain.

"Yes, the number of food recalls has indeed increased in recent years," he says.

"The rise is partly due to improvements in detection," says Detwiler, who is scheduled to moderate sessions Sept. 10 and Sept. 11 during the Food Integrity Global Conference in Amsterdam.

That's the good news, he says. But there's another factor as well.

"The complexity of the modern food supply chain, with its reliance on global sourcing, increases the risk of contamination at various points from production to distribution," Detwiler says.

"Changes in consumer preference toward ready-to-eat foods and fresh produce, which are more susceptible to contamination, have heightened the risk."

Food products ordered via online groceries, food delivery services and meal kits often do not go through the same scrutiny applied at earlier stages of the food chain, Detwiler says.

Take the Weirs Farm national vegetable recall. It includes a multitude of pre-sliced or diced veggies and herbs, including chopped cilantro, diced pepper with onions and cubes of butternut squash.

Lethal consequences

[The CDC estimates](#) that every year 48 million people get sick from foodborne illness, 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die.

Detwiler says advances in food safety technology such as [whole-genome sequencing](#) have enhanced officials' efforts to identify and trace pathogens such as listeria, salmonella and allergens.

Plus, he says, "increased regulatory scrutiny and mandatory reporting requirements mean that food companies are more likely to issue recalls as a precautionary measure."

When it comes to listeria, the stakes are particularly high, Detwiler says. Thirteen years ago, [33 people died](#) from the bacterial infection linked to cantaloupe consumption.

In many cases, listeria, which can take one day to 10 weeks to develop symptoms, is so mild people don't know they are infected, [according to the Mayo Clinic](#).

But it can lead to blood infection and meningitis, with those who are pregnant, people over 65 and individuals with suppressed immune systems being most at risk.

"My main observation is that listeria is more harmful than many may assume," says Detwiler, who was featured in a [recent Netflix documentary](#), "Poisoned: the Dirty Truth About Your Food."

"Approximately 20% of listeriosis cases in [pregnant women](#) result in fetal loss, including miscarriages and stillborns," he says.

"Around 50% of pregnancies affected by listeriosis result in preterm delivery, where the baby is born before 37 weeks of gestation," Detwiler says.

"Of the babies born alive to mothers with listeriosis, about one-third suffer from neonatal listeriosis, which can lead to severe complications such as sepsis and meningitis."

"The mortality rate for news with listeriosis is high, ranging from 20 to 30%, despite treatment," Detwiler says.

Other recalls

In Canada, Silk non-dairy milk has been recalled amid a listeria outbreak that has killed three people, according to U.S. Today.

Florida-grown cucumbers led to an outbreak of salmonella infections with more than 500 cases of illness in 34 states and the District of Columbia this summer.

The CDC says the cucumber salmonella outbreak is now over, as is a [recall of cheese](#) associated with listeria this year.

"These incidents underline the need for comprehensive food safety practices across different sectors, from farm to fork," Detwiler says, adding that safety "blind spots" in the final stages of food delivery,

storage and handling exist.

Changing consumer habits regarding food shopping "demands a cultural shift toward proactive risk management" including training and investment in food safety infrastructure, he says.

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