

Foodborne illness costs US \$152 billion annually, report estimates

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A new study by a former U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) economist estimates the total economic impact of foodborne illness across the nation to be a combined \$152 billion annually.

The Produce Safety Project, an initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts at Georgetown University, published the report, Health-Related [Costs](#) from [Foodborne Illness](#) in the United States. In addition, an interactive online map that graphically represents this cost information for every state in the nation is available at www.MakeOurFoodSafe.org/cost_map.

The report ranks states according to their total costs related to foodborne illness and cost per case for an individual, which is \$1,850 on average nationwide. The ten states with the highest costs per case are: Hawaii, Florida, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, the District of Columbia, Mississippi, New York, Massachusetts and New Jersey.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) estimates that approximately 76 million new cases of food-related illness - resulting in 5,000 deaths and 325,000 hospitalizations - occur in the United States each year. Continuing outbreaks every year show that this is not a problem that is going away.

"The costs associated with foodborne illness are substantial," says report author Robert L. Scharff, a former FDA economist who is now an assistant professor in the Department of Consumer Sciences at The Ohio State University. "This study puts the problem of foodborne illness in its proper perspective and should help facilitate reasonable action designed to mitigate this problem."

The release of the report comes as the U.S. Senate may soon vote on comprehensive food-safety legislation. The U.S. House of Representatives passed its food-safety bill (H.R.

2749) last July, and just before Thanksgiving, the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions unanimously approved the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (S. 510).

"This report makes it clear that the gaps in our food-safety system are causing significant health and economic impacts," says Erik Olson, director of food and consumer product safety with the Pew Health Group. "Especially in challenging economic times we cannot afford to waste billions of dollars fighting preventable diseases after it is too late. The Senate needs to act on this now and pass legislation that will improve protections for public health."

"The data and analysis released today should show our lawmakers that they need to send strong food-safety legislation to the president's desk as soon as possible," says Marilu Wilson of Bedford, New Hampshire, whose son suffered from a Salmonella infection. "The new legislation may not help my family with the unfortunate events that we have experienced, but it could save lives and spare others from suffering what Ryan has endured."

Despite the substantial magnitude of this problem, the aggregate economic cost of health losses associated with foodborne illnesses has not been examined comprehensively in this way before.

There are a number of ways to estimate the economic impact of foodborne illness. This report uses an FDA cost-estimate approach: health-related costs are the sum of medical costs (physician services, pharmaceuticals, and hospital costs) and losses to quality of life (lost life expectancy, pain and suffering, and functional disability). The report also estimates the cost of illnesses associated specifically with produce, which is linked to the largest number of outbreaks involving FDA-regulated foods. For example, E. coli O157:H7 cases in produce accounted for 39 percent of outbreaks and 54 percent of illnesses.

Using CDC data, the report estimates that foodborne illness costs related to produce alone are almost \$39 billion per year in the U.S.

While the Make Our Food Safe coalition does not necessarily endorse any single method to develop such estimates, coalition members agree that this study highlights the magnitude of the problem and the need for action to reduce foodborne disease. Furthermore, the coalition agrees that steps to reduce or eliminate contaminated food are sometimes pressing public-health measures that must be taken even when, due to data gaps, a comprehensive monetized economic analysis is not possible.

More information: To obtain a copy of the report, visit www.MakeOurFoodSafe.org.

Provided by Pew Health Group

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