20 Years of Sprout-related Outbreaks: FDA’s Investigative Efforts
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Abstract

Background: Although the Food and Drug Administration has always responded to foodborne outbreaks of FDA-regulated products, FDA’s Coordinated Outbreak Response and Evaluation Network (CORE) was established in 2011 to provide a dedicated multidisciplinary team to coordinate the evaluation, investigation, and notably, guide prevention efforts of foodborne illness outbreaks. CORE also utilizes FDA outbreak data to inform prevention initiatives.

Methods: Using data from the FDA CORE Outbreak Database and the FDA Emergency Operations Network system, foodborne illness outbreaks of FDA-regulated food products were analyzed by product category; year; pathogen; and number of illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths.

Results: Since 1996, FDA was involved in 48 outbreaks associated with sprouts; resulting in more than 2500 cases; 186 hospitalizations and 3 deaths. The majority of outbreaks were attributed to alfalfa sprouts (n=30), followed by clover; (n=7) mung bean (n=6) and sprouted chia powder (n=1). Salmonella was the most common pathogen identified (n=35), followed by E.coli (n=11) and Listeria (n=2). The three deaths were attributed to one Listeria outbreak (n=2) and one Salmonella outbreak (n=1).

Discussion and Conclusion

A coordinated effort to respond to foodborne illness outbreaks enables FDA to streamline and more quickly identify, respond to, and prevent outbreaks and enhance food safety. Outreach to the sprout industry is planned in conjunction with the Sprout Safety Alliance to help sprout producers implement best practices in the safe production of sprouts.

Consumer/Patient Messaging

FDA’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition publishes foods safety pamphlets for people at risk for foodborne illnesses. People at risk include young children, elderly, pregnant women, and those who may be immunocompromised. The pamphlets refer to raw and lightly cooked sprouts as a high risk food and advise vulnerable populations to not eat this type of product. The food safety pamphlets are available at: www.fda.gov/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminantsPeopleAtRisk/default.htm

What can consumers do to reduce the risk of illness if they want to eat sprouts?*
- Wash sprouts thoroughly under running water before eating or cooking. Washing may reduce bacteria that may be present, but it will not eliminate it.
- Cook sprouts thoroughly. Cooking kills harmful bacteria and reduces the risk of illness.

* www.fda.gov/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/syst overviewaterials/ucm142590.htm