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Judith S. Kronick

*University of Connecticut School of Medicine and Dentistry*

Alberta Richetelle

*University of Connecticut School of Medicine and Dentistry*

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# HEALTHNET NEWS

A newsletter for public librarians and others interested in consumer health information services

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## FOOD SAFETY



### AN INTRODUCTION

During a recent shopping trip to the supermarket, have you hesitated just as you were about to toss a nutritious, sealed package of fresh spinach into your grocery cart? Perhaps your indecision was influenced by recent headlines about contaminated food. Reports about contaminated spinach have not been in the news since 2006 but information about recalls of tainted hamburger meat, canned chili, onions, and pet food have highlighted media reports recently.

This **Healthnet News** special issue about food safety focuses on a worldwide health issue that concerns all of us.

#### *How widespread is the problem?*

An estimate by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that food-borne illnesses affect 76 million United States residents each year, after they consumed food or drinks that have been tainted with parasites, viruses, bacteria, or toxins. Pregnant women, very young children, and older adults are especially vulnerable. Two to three per cent of patients have food-borne illnesses that result in long-term health effects. Approximately five thousand affected patients die as a result of their illnesses. It is often difficult to determine if widespread gastrointestinal disease outbreaks were caused by contaminated food or other sources, making it very challenging to control the illness at its origin. If a food is the known source, it may have many ingredients, making the search for the origin of the problem even more difficult.

There are many opportunities for food to be contaminated—from the growth process to its harvest, storage, or preparation in a home kitchen. As food consumers, we have control over a limited part of our food's path from farm to dinner table. But opportunities for improving the safety of our food exist... as we shop for meals, make selections in restaurants, and prepare foods at home.

Many of the websites and other resources described in this Healthnet News issue provide background information on food safety, descriptions of the sources of illness, recommendations for avoiding food-borne illnesses at restaurants and at home, and information about news of food recalls.

#### *How is food safety regulated?*

Two federal agencies regulate our food supply. The **U.S. Food and Drug Administration** – <http://www.fda.gov/> regulates approximately eighty per cent of the nation's food supply, including food for animals and humans. However, the **U.S. Department of Agriculture** - <http://www.usda.gov/> - regulates poultry, meat, and egg products.

The **Center for Science in the Public Interest** at <http://www.cspinet.org/>, a nutrition-focused consumer advocacy organization, is encouraging the establishment of one, unified federal government food safety agency.

In **Connecticut**, the **Department of Agriculture** - <http://www.ct.gov/doag/site/default.asp> - has responsibility for shellfish sanitation and safety as it is harvested along the state's coastline. The **Division of Food and Standards** of the **Department of Consumer Protection** - <http://www.ct.gov/dcp/cwp/view.asp?a=1621&q=273706> - provides oversight for the manufacture and sale of food in the state.



Healthnet: Connecticut Consumer Health Information Network  
Lyman Maynard Stowe Library ♦ University of Connecticut Health Center  
PO Box 4003 ♦ Farmington CT 06034-4003  
Telephone: 860/679-4055 ♦ email : [richetelle@nso.uhc.edu](mailto:richetelle@nso.uhc.edu)  
<http://library.uhc.edu/departm/hnet>

Connecticut no longer has its own inspection program for meat and poultry plants. The United States Department of Agriculture, which regulates poultry, meat, and egg products nationally, assumed the role of inspecting Connecticut meat and poultry plants in 1975.

In July of 2007, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration started a voluntary, national program to help states adopt more unified food regulatory systems. The Manufactured Food Regulatory Program Standards will be pilot-tested in three states this year.

In response to an increase in recalls of meat after e. coli contamination, the U.S.D.A.'s Food Safety and Inspection Service announced in October 2007 that it has increased the number of tests of ground beef and that it is planning a new testing program for surveillance of beef manufacturing plants that have tested positive for e. coli. In addition, the agency will require other countries exporting beef to the U.S. to perform equivalent tests on their meat exports.

## **FOOD SAFETY BASICS**

### ***Bacteria and Foodborne Illness***

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/bacteria/index.htm>



The **National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease**, a component of the National Institutes of Health, offers a consumer booklet on “Bacteria and Foodborne Illness” that provides a helpful overview of foodborne illnesses. It discusses causes of the illnesses, their symptoms, complications, and ways to prevent them. There are explanations of six common bacteria that can precipitate food-borne illnesses, including salmonella, E. coli, Shigella, and C. botulinum. The text is straightforward and comprehensive. The booklet may be freely copied.

### ***Consumer Health Information/U.S. Food and Drug Administration***

<http://www.fda.gov/consumer/default.htm>

On its Consumer Health Information page, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration offers food safety information for consumers including advice on purchasing, handling and storing raw produce, dangers of consuming unpasteurized milk, safe handling of seafood, food alerts for pregnant women, and questions and answers about the FDA's procedures for evaluating the safety of food imported into the U.S.

### ***Foodborne Illness***

[http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/foodborneinfections\\_g.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/foodborneinfections_g.htm)

Frequently asked questions (and answers) about food-borne illness from the website of the **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**. Questions include: How are food-borne diseases diagnosed? How is a food-borne disease outbreak investigated? How does food become contaminated? What can consumers do when they eat in restaurants? Available in Spanish as well as English.

### ***FoodBorne Illness and Disease Fact Sheets***

[http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact\\_Sheets/Foodborne\\_Illness\\_&\\_Disease\\_Fact\\_Sheets/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Foodborne_Illness_&_Disease_Fact_Sheets/index.asp)

Published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service, this website provides links to a collection of fact sheets about the nature of food-borne illness and specific pathogens, such as botulism, e. coli, campylobacter, and salmonella. Some of the fact sheets are available in Spanish.

### ***Gateway to Government Food Safety Information***

<http://www.foodsafety.gov/>

As the “Gateway to Government Food Safety Information,” this website links to publications from a variety of federal and state agencies. It is published by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. It includes consumer advice about food handling, protecting the safety of food during power outages, using a slow cooker safely, as well as specifics on preparing baby food.

## ***Home Food Safety...It's in Your Hands***

<http://www.homefoodsafety.org/>



“Home Food Safety...It's in Your Hands” is the online consumer education program of the **American Dietetic Association**. Brief one-page guides to practical topics such as eating lunch at the office, holiday buffets, tailgating, and warehouse club shopping are available in Spanish as well as English. An interactive Food Safety Kitchen Quiz allows consumers to test their food preparation techniques. The website includes a downloadable refrigerator/freezer food storage chart and a “refrigerator calculator” with specifics on how long foods can be safely stored. The calculator concludes with the recommendation: “When in doubt, throw it out!”

**Complete Food and Nutrition Guide**. Roberta Larson Duyff. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. 676 p. (ISBN 0-470-04115-3 paperback) \$24.95.

A publication of the American Dietetic Association, the national professional association of dietitians, this important, consumer-friendly book includes nutritional information for all ages. Chapter twelve, “The Safe Kitchen,” describes bacteria, parasites, and viruses, discusses when to call your doctor if you suspect you have contracted a food-borne illness, and includes a kitchen safety checklist. It explains how to keep kitchen tools safe from cross-contamination, offers precautions that reduce risks from eating raw seafood, and describes safe food storage. (When did you say you purchased that package of hamburger at the back of your freezer?)

## **HAVE A CONCERN ABOUT A FOOD?**

If you have a problem with a food product or suspect that a food product is contaminated, whom do you call?

According to the website of the **Connecticut Department of Public Health**, the first place to contact is your local department of public health. This is also the agency to contact for concerns about restaurant food. An online directory of Connecticut town health departments is at [https://www.han.ct.gov/local\\_health/localmap.asp?dphPNavCtr=-47507](https://www.han.ct.gov/local_health/localmap.asp?dphPNavCtr=-47507). The state Food Protection Program at 860-509-7297 is a backup resource for complaints.

Since distinct federal agencies regulate different food products, your calls about food complaints must be directed to the appropriate agency.

If you decide to contact a federal agency with concerns about meat and poultry, you should call the U.S. Department of Agriculture **Meat and Poultry Hotline** toll-free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**, for the hearing-impaired (TTY) **1-800-256-7072**. Food safety specialists who speak Spanish as well as English are available. The Hotline is staffed on weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time. It is unavailable on federal holidays with the exception of Thanksgiving. It is staffed from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Eastern time on Thanksgiving. A lengthy recorded message may precede the opportunity to dial “0” to speak with a staff member. However, you may interrupt the recording at any time by pressing “0.”

Complaints about non-meat products should be made to the U. S. Food and Drug Administration. There are Consumer Complaint Coordinators for each state. The phone number for the Consumer Complaint Coordinator in Connecticut, (781) 596-7700, is actually the New England Regional office of the FDA. Only emergencies should be reported at the FDA's emergency phone number, staffed around-the-clock: 301-443-1240.

## **FOOD RECALLS**



According to the website of **Food Safety and Inspection Service** of the **U.S. Department of Agriculture**, “a food recall is a voluntary action by a manufacturer or distributor to protect the public from products that may cause health problems or death.” A manufacturer sometimes enforces recalls because the U.S.D.A.'s Food Safety and Inspection Service has requested the action. “If a company refuses [the request],” ...the Food Safety and Inspection Service “has the legal authority to detain and seize those products in commerce.”

There is more than one source for information about food recalls.

The **U.S. Food and Drug Administration** regulates about 80 percent of the food supply, which includes food for humans and animals, except meat products, poultry products, and egg products, which are regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Nationally, press releases about meat, poultry, and egg-related food recalls are published online at [http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fsis\\_Recalls/index.aspx](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fsis_Recalls/index.aspx) on the website of the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The **Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)** website at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/>, has a fact sheet about the food recall process and news about recent recalls.

“Recalls, Market Withdrawals, and Safety Alerts” for the last sixty days from the Food and Drug Administration are published online at <http://www.fda.gov/opacom/7/alerts.html>. There is a link to an archive for earlier recalls.

An October 2007 question-and-answer page about inspection of imported products from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration website at <http://www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/imports101207.html> states that “although we don’t physically inspect every product, we electronically examine 100% of imported food products before they reach our borders. Based on criteria we have set up, an automated system alerts us to any concerns. Then we investigate further and, if warranted, do a physical examination of the product.”

The **Federal Citizen Information Center** publishes articles about recent food (and other consumer product) recalls, under “Food Products” at <http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/recallsdesc.htm>. These articles are from a variety of government agencies.

The website of the Center for Science in the Public Interest includes an “Outbreak Alert” at [http://www.cspinet.org/foodsafety/outbreak\\_report.html](http://www.cspinet.org/foodsafety/outbreak_report.html), with details about distribution of specific contaminated foods, states affected, and identifying codes.

## **FOOD SAFETY UPDATES**

### ***What’s New at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration***

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~news/whatsnew.html>



On this FDA webpage, there are current announcements about food hazards and consumer food advisories.

On its Consumer Health Information page at <http://www.fda.gov/consumer/default.htm>, the Food and Drug Administration also offers food safety information for consumers including advice on purchasing, handling and storing raw produce, dangers of consuming unpasteurized milk, safe handling of seafood, food alerts for pregnant women, and questions and answers about the FDA’s procedures for evaluating the safety of food imported into the U.S. Consumer Updates include information about medications as well as food regulated by the agency.

### ***Food Irradiation***

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/foodirradiation.htm> - *whatis*

This website, from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, provides background information on irradiation of food, how the process affects food, how it is measured, and which foods can be irradiated.

### ***Medlineplus***

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/foodsafety.html>

Updates on food safety news are available on the Food Safety web pages of the National Library of Medicine’s Medlineplus website for health consumers.

## **ORGANIC FOOD**

Organically grown food must conform to United States Department of Agriculture requirements in order to be labeled “organic.” However, this designation describes the process used to grow the food. It does not guarantee the food’s safety.

### ***Environmental Working Group***

<http://www.foodnews.org/>

A shopper’s guide to pesticides found in produce is available on the website of the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit environmental advocacy organization. The guide lists the “Dirty Dozen” produce types, which should be purchased in organic form, and the “Cleanest 12” which are lowest in pesticides.

### ***Organic Standards***

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexIE.htm>

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program sets specific standards for the designation of foods as "organic." The website explains the labeling and certification standards for organic food in the U.S.

### ***Pesticides and Food***

<http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/food/>

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulates the use of pesticides on food. This consumer-oriented website discusses pesticide residue limits on foods, sensitivity of children to pesticides, and health problems linked to pesticides.

## **WEBSITES FOR CHILDREN**

### ***Food Safety/Teenshealth***

[http://kidshealth.org/teen/nutrition/general/food\\_safety.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/nutrition/general/food_safety.html)

Brief food safety information on supermarket shopping, kitchen cleanup, and storing leftovers, directed to teenagers in an informal style. From the Kidshealth website, published by the Nemours Foundation's Center for Children's Health Media. Additional food safety articles appear on the parents and children's areas of the Kidshealth website.

### ***FIGHT BAC!***

<http://www.fightbac.org/>

The bold color and the cartoon characters pictured on this educational website will appeal to children. Bacteria in food are represented by an evil yet humorous cartoon character named "BAC" that consumers are encouraged to fight by using the safe food handling practices described. The Scrub Club area of the website is complete with audio for a theme song and a rap-style hand washing song. The Food Detectives section includes games such as the Case of the Filthy Fingers.

There are links to brief, colorful brochures that can be printed from the website as well as fact sheets, children's activity sheets, and other educational materials for grades kindergarten to twelve. Some are in Spanish.

Published by the Partnership for Food Safety Education, a collaboration of food industry organizations, consumer groups, nutrition professional associations, and U.S. government agencies.

### ***FDA Kids' Home Page***

<http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/kids/>

A colorful, interactive food safety quiz is found on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Kids' Home Page. Some food safety news is included among the brief, one paragraph announcements on the "In the News" section of the web page.



*Healthnet News is written by Alberta L. Richetelle and Judith Kronick.  
If you have questions about anything in the newsletter or about Healthnet services for Connecticut public libraries,  
please call 860/679-4055; e-mail address :richetelle@nso.uhc.edu*

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