Lifelong Health: Dealing with the danger of contaminated foods

by Dr_David_Lipschitz

In a recent speech nominating former New York City Health Commissioner Margaret Hamburg as director of the Food and Drug Administration, President Barack Obama placed food safety center stage as he seeks to improve the under-funded, understaffed FDA. Obama said he would create a Food Safety Working Group to review the outdated (circa 1906, during the Theodore Roosevelt administration) laws that establish food safety guidelines.

But even with all this added attention, can we ever truly escape the dangers of contaminated foods? Unfortunately, the answer may be no. With the huge degree of human error â€” in processing plants and in homes â€” food contamination likely will be a challenge forever.

Every year, contaminated meat, fruits or vegetables enter the marketplace and initiate a variety of food-borne infections. The contamination almost always occurs by exposure to animal feces, which happens during growth or because of poor hygiene in processing plants. In addition, contaminated water can contribute to food-borne illnesses. The failure of an infected worker to wash his hands adequately or to wear protective gear can also lead to problems. Some plants are outdated, use old equipment and do not have rigorous safety systems to prevent contamination.

The most recent outbreaks of food-borne illnesses have occurred because of contamination by salmonella. In the past 12 months alone, salmonella contamination has occurred in spinach, Mexican serrano peppers and peanut butter. Last year, salmonella in peppers made more than 1,300 people ill and led to one death. In 1996, peanut contamination led to 600 cases of salmonella poisoning in Australia. A 2006 outbreak of peanut butter contamination caused 620 cases of salmonella infection in 47 states.

This year's outbreak led to 500 infections and three deaths in the United States and Canada. Investigations by the FDA have localized the contamination to a peanut processing plant in Georgia, which led to one of the largest food recalls in history and a dramatic reduction in peanut butter sales nationwide (which certainly did not help the unsuspecting peanut farmer).

While these nationwide "outbreaks" receive much attention, it is highly likely that contamination of food at home and restaurants leads to far more cases of salmonella infections than those reported. Each year, about 36,000 cases are officially reported in the United States, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that about 1.4 million cases and 600 deaths occur annually. Salmonella accounts for 31 percent of all food-related deaths.

Salmonella is a tough little bug. Once the bacteria have contaminated a certain food, there is no good way to remove them other than irradiation, a process that is frowned upon. From a food processing perspective, the better solution appears to be modernized facilities, trained workers and more frequent inspection.

Even with a massive overhaul of the food safety guidelines, Americans still will have to deal with food contamination. Exposure to contaminated food typically leads to abdominal pain, nausea and diarrhea. Most salmonella infections are self-limiting, meaning they can be resolved without anything more than symptomatic treatment, including adequate fluid intake and antidiarrheals for loose stools.

On occasion, salmonella infection can be much more serious and can lead to death. Always see a physician if you develop diarrhea and have blood, mucus or pus in your stools or if your abdominal pain is extremely severe, especially if you have traveled out of the country recently. An evaluation always is warranted if you develop a fever of higher than 100 degrees.

If you experience a rising fever, a persistent headache or confusion, seek help immediately. In certain people, the bacteria can enter the blood, causing life-threatening septicemia. Here, appropriate use of antibiotics can cure the problem and prevent death.

When it comes to food safety, you are your biggest advocate. Here are some rules to protect yourself: Wash your hands. Always clean your kitchen counters. Keep raw meat and poultry away from other foods. Remember: Heat kills germs. Make sure your food is well-cooked. Be wary of food contamination, and take reports of infections seriously. With a little effort, you can protect yourself.

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