

02.13.09 What We Really Know is Peanuts

I just don't understand the way this peanut recall is being handled. But first, let me correct my wording in last week's column when I said this might prove to be the largest food-borne illness our country has ever seen. That is not so. I meant that it might prove to be the largest food recall the country has ever seen.

I can admit my errors. Heck, that's lots easier than not dealing with them!

I have not been able to understand our food establishments' confidence in the Food and Drug Administration's list of recalls because each morning begins with about 20 new, separate e-mails regarding new products joining the recall list. That means, of course, that items considered safe yesterday may be off the shelf today. For a couple of weeks, I hoped this meant many were being recalled "just in case," simply because the food items included peanuts or peanut products. I was also hoping this wasn't the case, because it is always best to stick to the truth and stick to what is supported by scientific evidence.

I understand that scientific evidence can grow, and that it takes time, but in this case it comes down to, "Does our product contain a peanut product that originated in Blakely, Ga.? If it does, we must recall it, just in case." The answer to that question is not really a scientific one. It is a question of record keeping. Bill of lading, chain of custody, accurate accounting; that sort of thing needs to be accomplished, and for good reason. I am told that many of these records are handwritten and that it takes a long time to enter all that data.

So, I can't help but wonder. Is it only the King Nut peanut plant that needs investigating? If everyone kept good records, why is it taking so long to discover which peanut products did and did not originate in Blakely?

Products containing peanuts tend to have a long shelf life. You don't have to throw away those unopened items. Just don't eat them. Once the list comes to an end, we will know. We will. Really. But for now, the list continues to grow each day. Why risk it?

Salmonella can be deadly to the young, the old and those with weakened immune systems. Why shouldn't we prevent those deaths by avoiding peanut products just for now?

"If you don't know the source, just don't eat it." That is the advice of Dr. Stephen Sundlof, the director of the Center For Food Safety and Applied Nutrition at the FDA.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA and wants all of you to be informed and safe. Err on the side of caution. Be informed. Check out AskKaren.gov some time. Contact Cathleen at 78- 293-6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us