

3-23-18 Food Recalls - Say Something

Boards of Health periodically receive food recall alerts for a wide variety of reasons. Sometimes there is contamination with something such as salmonella. One of the worst in Massachusetts occurred many years involving listeria in milk. It was tragic because most efforts and watchful eyes, when it comes to milk, were on pasteurization. Invented by French scientist Louis Pasteur in the late 1800's and adopted by the U. S. in the early 1900's, pasteurization allowed people to rely on the safety of milk products. The elderly and the unborn are vulnerable to listeria. This particular outbreak killed three elderly men and caused at least one miscarriage. In addition to those tragedies, a family-owned dairy went out of business.

How did it happen? It was an old fashioned kind of farm. There were open rooms with conveyor belts bringing this and that kind of milk from filling to capping. Listeria is fairly abundant in nature and grows in places like puddles. All it took was a splash from here to there and some open bottles were contaminated. Specifically, it was the coffee-flavored milk that received the contamination. People who became sick had purchased and consumed the coffee milk and some people still had some left in their fridge. The investigation was thorough, discovering the common denominator, and spared the loss of life for future customers but was not early enough to spare lives altogether or the farm.

The investigation is critical. Before the investigation begins, however, there needs to be a reason for it. That is where consumers come in as the crucially important assistants to the scientists. It is usually a matter of Feel Something (as in feeling sick)-Say Something or reported actual diagnoses, as required by law, from physicians. How many people want to go the doctor or hospital when they are suffering from vomiting and diarrhea, though? Food borne illnesses are greatly underreported.

Other consumer reports are a matter of See Something-Say Something. Last week there was a recall of smoked pork sausage products due to possible "foreign matter contamination". The recall involved "109,603 pounds of smoked pork sausage products that may be contaminated with extraneous materials" according

to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). That recall was initiated based on three consumer complaints for "pieces of hard, green plastic identified in the sausage product". Those recalls spare injury by removing the product from the shelves but I always find myself wanting to know this: How did it happen? Once we discover how it happened, we can arrive at a solution to prevent it.

When complaints are brought to my attention at the local level, I have that opportunity to work with others and try as hard as I can to discover and solve the problem. Sometimes the trail comes to an end with uncertainty at a lab. What was that piece of plastic in the meat? Not sure. Other times, I have been able to work with others, go to the source, inspect a facility and say, "Ah, ha!" That is it! See that cracked rubber spatula? There is a piece missing and that is the same substance found in the muffin! And, by the way, that spatula should have been thrown away."

If you suspect illness from food, please go to the doctor and please ask for a diagnosis, as quite often they relieve the symptoms and do not test. A diagnosis greatly assists the investigation. How do we know what to look for if we don't know what we are looking for?

If you find a problem, such as "extraneous materials" in your food, please do let the establishment know but also take pictures of it and bring it in to the board of health, so that we can conduct an investigation. I will be very grateful to you for doing so! Say something; I am listening. Show me something; I will investigate.

For more information, talk to virtual Karen. She is a great resource! Consumers with food safety questions can "Ask Karen," the FSIS virtual representative available 24 hours a day at AskKaren.gov. The toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) is available in English and Spanish and can be reached from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Eastern Time) Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. The online Electronic Consumer Complaint Monitoring System can be accessed 24 hours a day at: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/reportproblem>.

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