

8-24-12 Let's Not Be Bugged

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), every year an estimated 48 million people in United States get sick from a food-borne disease, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die.

I don't think a day goes by without my email's inbox receiving several food recalls. It's my fault. Well, not the recalls, but the fact that I receive so many. I signed up for FDA recall notices and others some years ago. Most of them concern undeclared allergens. Most of them apply to someplace else and, unless I know someone there, I guess I'll just have to let those other places and people take care of themselves. I'll have to admit that every once in a while, I am tempted to "unsubscribe" to these updates and RSS feeds, but then I'd be uninformed and I just can't live with that! When facing that dilemma, I always arrive at the same conclusion: at least someone is watching and there are mechanisms in place for reporting, tracking and recalling.

Sometimes a food recall starts small and then grows, spreading from state to state as we realize how important and common an ingredient such as the peanut is. Remember that one in 2009? This year, the Gill's onion recall is still going on, as we hear about salads and salsas with the problematic ingredient.

There are many different food pathogens creating food-borne illnesses for different reasons, including E. coli and Salmonella but the one most recently in the news is listeria. It is showing up on cantaloupes, honeydew melons, onions, salads, cut vegetable trays for grilling and sliced mushrooms, to name a few.

Listeria stands out from the other pathogens for a few reasons. For one thing, it can continue to grow at correct refrigerator temperatures! While it will always be important to keep our refrigerator's temperature at 40 degrees or slightly below, this serves as a warning that proper temperature is not enough to prevent illness, especially when the food will not be cooked, such as with those melons!

Out in nature, listeria is fairly ubiquitous, showing up in the soil, water and animals' intestines. This reminds us that our produce must be rinsed before we refrigerate and serve it. The outer leaves of lettuce should be discarded and given to the compost pile and the inner ones thoroughly rinsed. No special produce sprays are necessary! Melons should be washed thoroughly (Give it a good scrub!) Then, the melons should be refrigerated. The washing is important, because these fruits grow on the ground, after all; then, they are handled, perhaps rinsed or brushed and then handled some more for their traveling experience. If the melon is not rinsed, the knife that slices is the knife that dices, for it will bring into the center whatever was on the outside. Let's leave outdoor things outdoors. It's like taking your shoes off when you enter the house.

The basics of washing hands, rinsing produce and scrubbing things that grow on the ground, cleaning up spills in the refrigerator, where listeria can continue to grow are all easy ways to prevent this problematic food-borne illness.

Listeria is problematic for two main reasons: It can kill the elderly, the immune compromised and the unborn. Those are tragic and mostly preventable circumstances. This is why pregnant women are cautioned against eating deli meats unless they cook them. Cooking destroys the listeria. Soft cheeses are another source of listeria and this is why Hispanic women are at extra risk because the traditional soft cheese, Queso Fresco, is traditionally made from raw or unpasteurized milk that can harbor listeria.

The second reason listeriosis is so problematic is the time frame for its symptoms. We are cautioned at FDA's and CDC's websites that if we experience the symptoms of fever, muscle aches, nausea, or diarrhea, especially after eating one of these recalled foods, we should seek medical care. Even scarier, listeriosis can also spread to the nervous system, causing headache, a stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance and/or convulsions. That's bad enough, but here's the kicker, according to FDA's website: "Symptoms may begin a few days after you've eaten contaminated food, but it may take as long as two months before the first signs and symptoms of infection begin." Two months!

That knowledge has helped me to decide that it is easier to clean hands and produce than to attempt to figure out what I ate two months ago! It is also reassuring to have a really great Primary Care Physician who will help you to figure out what you have, when you have it and why you have it! I love my PCP, Dr. George Cuchural, in South Weymouth for that very reason!

Check out FDA's website for all you need to know about food recalls and what's being done to improve the situation, such as the Genome Project for Food Pathogens, a collaboration between FDA, the University of California/Davis and Agilent Technologies Inc. As the gene sequences are completed, they will be stored in the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Biotechnology Information's public database. This is an exciting project!

Food scientists of the future, we need you! Let's not be bugged. Let's be protected!

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