

## Center for Science in the Public Interest

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### Salmonella Outbreaks Linked to Produce on the Rise

#### Produce is Primary Cause of Large Salmonella Outbreaks

Most people properly associate Salmonella with raw poultry. But according to an analysis of food-poisoning outbreaks by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, fresh produce is catching up with chicken as a major culprit of Salmonella infections. And, says CSPI, produce-related outbreaks tend to be larger than poultry-related outbreaks, and sicken more people, sometimes hundreds at a time.

In CSPI's [Outbreak Alert! database](#), which contains information on nearly 4,500 outbreaks between 1990 and 2003, produce triggered 554 outbreaks, sickening 28,315 people. Of those 554 outbreaks, 111 were due to Salmonella. Although poultry has historically been responsible for far more Salmonella infections, in the most recent years in CSPI's database, produce seems to be catching up. From 1990 to 2001 poultry accounted for 121 Salmonella outbreaks and produce accounted for 80. But in 2002-2003, produce accounted for 31 Salmonella outbreaks and poultry accounted for 29.

"Fresh fruits and vegetables are at the center of a healthy diet, so it's critical that steps are taken to improve their safety," said CSPI food safety director Caroline Smith DeWaal. "FDA should require growers to limit the use of manure to times and products where it poses no risk. And packers and shippers should mark packaging to ensure easy traceback when fruits and vegetables are implicated in an outbreak."

Although produce outbreaks were responsible for the most illnesses, seafood was responsible for more outbreaks, 899, than any other food, but only 9,312 illnesses. Poultry triggered 476 outbreaks involving 14,729 illnesses; beef triggered 438 outbreaks involving 12,702 illnesses, and eggs triggered 329 outbreaks involving 10,847 illnesses. CSPI's database includes only outbreaks where both the food and the pathogen are identified, so its data represents only a fraction of the total burden of foodborne illnesses. The CDC estimates that 76 million Americans get sick and 5,000 die from foodborne hazards each year.

In recent years, Salmonella outbreaks have been traced back to lettuce, salads, melons, sprouts, tomatoes, and other fruit- and vegetable-containing dishes. In 2004, there were three separate outbreaks involving 561 Salmonella infections that were linked to contaminated Roma tomatoes. From 2000 to 2002, Salmonella-contaminated cantaloupe imported from Mexico sickened 155 and killed two.

Salmonella isn't the only pathogen that ends up on produce. In 2003, green onions in salsa from a Pennsylvania ChiChi's restaurant transmitted hepatitis A to 555 people, killing three. Also that year, E. coli on a bagged salad mix sickened more than 50 restaurant patrons in the San Diego area.

CSPI has long recommended the creation of a single food safety agency and an emphasis on improving on-farm practices to help curb foodborne illness. FDA-regulated foods are linked to two-thirds of foodborne illness outbreaks, yet the FDA's budget is only 38 percent of the total federal food safety budget. While USDA has the resources to inspect meat plants daily, the FDA inspects food facilities it regulates on average just once every five years. Neither agency has principal responsibility for overseeing on-farm food-safety practices.

*CSPI's report, "Outbreak Alert! Closing the Gaps in Our Federal Food Safety Net," is updated annually, and is available at [http://www.cspinet.org/foodsafety/outbreak\\_report.html](http://www.cspinet.org/foodsafety/outbreak_report.html)*

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