

U.S. failed to recall meat after outbreak CDC report suggest government could have prevented salmonella cases

The Associated Press

Updated: 8:27 p.m. ET March 8, 2006

WASHINGTON - The government declined to alert the public about suspect ground beef or request a recall after a 2004 salmonella outbreak that sickened at least 31 people nationwide, according to a report by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The report, made public Wednesday by food safety advocates, said the Agriculture Department traced illnesses in nine states -- Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Tennessee and Wisconsin -- and Washington, D.C., to a national supermarket chain and a single meat processing plant.

The department decided no action was needed because the plant was following federal guidelines. The CDC did not name the plant or supermarket chain. A separate report from the Minnesota Department of Health referred to the chain as a member-only warehouse.

Unlike E. coli and listeria, salmonella in raw meat is not an "adulterant" under federal guidelines. That is because people are expected to cook raw meat before they eat it, and cooking kills salmonella.

Department spokesman Steven Cohen said officials did a full investigation and were prepared to act on any problems at the plant. "We didn't find problems," Cohen said.

That's not much comfort for people who got sick, said Carol Tucker Foreman, director of food policy for Consumer Federation of America.

"Nobody died, but 31 people ... got sick from eating this product, and I can tell you, not one of them thought that it was their best day on earth," Foreman said. "This is not just a bellyache."

Salmonella is a bacteria that causes diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps and in some cases requires hospitalization.

It can be deadly unless infected people are treated right away with antibiotics. Of the estimated 1.4 million cases of salmonella each year in the United States, about 400 people die, according to CDC.

Foreman and other food safety advocates called attention Wednesday to the report on the outbreak that was issued by CDC late last month. They said the department could have taken steps to prevent more people from getting sick but chose not to.

"They never announced this outbreak," said Donna Rosenbaum of Safe Tables Our Priority. "I would guess there are a number of cases of this that could have been avoided. It ran from August to October, so this was in people's refrigerators and in their freezers."

She noted that many cases of food poisoning go unreported; CDC estimates there are 39 cases of unreported illness for every one case that is reported.

While the department lacks legal authority to recall meat, it can ask companies to do recalls. No company has ever refused a recall request.

The department has issued alerts involving salmonella before. For example, a news release last year said that several salmonella infections in the Midwest were linked to stuffed and breaded frozen chicken entrees. The announcement pointed out the food needed to be fully cooked to be safe.

Alerts have also been issued about drug-resistant forms of the salmonella bacteria.

"Although salmonella is not considered an adulterant in raw ground beef, we do a great deal of outreach to help consumers understand how to handle and cook their meat and poultry to avoid chances of becoming ill," Cohen said.

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