

How Safe Is Our Food?

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Last fall, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) ran the cover story "Safe Food Quiz." It asked readers a series of questions about their knowledge of food safety.¹ Although we have discussed food safety in this column before, I felt the information was disturbing enough to warrant the attention of the chiropractic community to remind our patients how to avoid food poisoning.

Salmonella

- In the United States, salmonella, along with campylobacter, causes 80% of all food poisoning illnesses and 75% of all deaths resulting from contaminated poultry and, to a lesser extent, beef. In the 1994 salmonella outbreak that poisoned over 200,000 Americans in 41 states through contaminated ice cream, the average contaminated serving contained only six salmonella bacteria.
- Salmonella poisoning can cause rheumatoid arthritis.
- Twenty-five percent of the chickens sold in the United States test positive for salmonella contamination.
- Salmonella must be heated to 160 degrees to be killed.
- Symptoms of salmonella poisoning include vomiting, nausea, fever and abdominal cramps.
- Salmonella symptoms begin 12-48 hours after contamination.
- Kosher poultry and poultry labeled "free range" contain just as much salmonella and campylobacter as generic supermarket brands.

Campylobacter

- Ninety percent of the chickens in the United States tested positive for campylobacter. Undercooked poultry and beef are the most common causes of campylobacter poisoning.
- Campylobacter can also be present in raw milk, shellfish and untreated water.
- Campylobacter symptoms include fever, diarrhea, abdominal pain and blood in the stool.
- Symptoms may not begin for two to five days.
- Campylobacter poisoning can cause nerve damage.

Escherichia Coli (E. Coli) 0157:H7

- The most common cause is undercooked ground beef.

- The classic sign is bloody diarrhea or pus in the stool.
- E. coli poisoning has also been caused by contaminated lettuce and apples.
- Beef that is no longer pink and juices that run clear do not necessarily indicate that e. coli has been destroyed.
- This particular strain has only recently been identified in the last few years. Science continues to identify previously unknown types of bacteria and other toxins that cause food poisoning.

Produce

- Fifty percent of the produce in the United States contains residue from at least one pesticide.
- Washing produce in mild dishwashing detergent eliminates pesticides 50 percent of the time.
- If 50 percent of the United States' produce contains pesticides, and washing all produce eliminates 50 percent of those pesticides, 25 percent of the washed produce consumed in the United States still contains pesticide residues.
- Although organic produce may have lower levels of pesticide, it can still be contaminated by groundwater, acid rain, air pollution and workers who have not practiced proper sanitation.
- In the kitchen, produce is commonly cross-contaminated when it is prepared by using the same utensils and surfaces (without washing them) used for preparing meat, fish and poultry

At Risk

- Those most likely to get food poisoning are senior citizens and people with weakened immune systems (i.e., those who are currently ill, recently recovered from illness or are under excessive stress).
- People who regularly use antacids are more likely to acquire food poisoning because stomach acid destroys many types of bacteria, and antacid users have -- you guessed it -- less acid.

Resources

University of California at Berkeley Wellness Letter August 1998;15(11)

University of California at Berkeley Wellness Encyclopedia. Boston; Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991.

Reference

Safe food quiz. *Nutrition Action Health Letter* October 1998;25(8)

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