

CDC: 1,000 Food-Borne Disease Outbreaks in a Year

Matt McMillen

Authors and Disclosures

September 8, 2011 — The latest numbers from the CDC show the U.S. had more than 1,000 outbreaks of food-borne disease in a single year.

The CDC study includes reports of illness from 2008, the most recent year that information is available.

The outbreaks caused 23,152 cases of illness, nearly 1,300 hospitalizations, and 22 deaths. But because most food-borne illnesses go unreported, the actual numbers are much higher. The CDC estimates that contaminated food causes as many as 48 million illnesses annually.

According to the CDC, a food-borne outbreak occurs when two or more cases of a similar illness are caused by a common food. An average of 24 such outbreaks were reported from each state or territory in 2008.

The total number of outbreaks was 10% less than the average number reported from 2003 to 2007. The number of outbreak-related illnesses in 2008 was also lower, by 5%.

Seventeen of the outbreaks crossed state lines, according to the CDC. Nine of those were caused by salmonella. Health officials identified the contaminated foods in six of those outbreaks: cantaloupe, cereal, ground turkey, ground white pepper, jalapeño and serrano peppers, and peanut butter.

Restaurant and deli food caused just over half of the 868 outbreaks that could be tied to a single location. Home cooking accounted for 15%.

Common Causes of Food-Borne Illness

As has been the case every year for the past 10 years, poultry, beef, and fish were the three most common culprits behind the various outbreaks reported. Health officials tied them to 32, 31, and 30 cases, respectively, or about 15% each.

The foods with the most outbreak-related illnesses were fruits and nuts (1,755 illnesses), vine vegetables (1,622 illnesses), and beef (952 illnesses). Salmonella in fruits, nuts, and vegetables caused more than 3,000 illnesses.

Salmonella caused 13 of the 22 deaths attributed to food-borne disease. No other cause came close.

Listeria was linked to three deaths. One death each was linked to norovirus and to mycotoxin, a substance produced by a fungus.

More people were hospitalized for salmonella poisoning than any other food-related cause, accounting for 62% of such cases. *E. coli* and norovirus accounted for 17% and 7% of hospitalizations, respectively.

Health officials pinpointed a single cause or likely cause in 666 of the reported outbreaks. Just under half were attributed to viruses; 44% were caused by bacteria. Norovirus was the most common disease among confirmed single-cause outbreaks, accounting for 233 cases. Salmonella, at 110 cases, ranked second.

The report states that most cases of norovirus were caused by vegetables that typically are not cooked, such as leafy greens commonly used in salads. Such foods are easily contaminated in kitchens or packaging facilities where proper sanitation is not practiced. This includes the home, restaurants, and processing plants.

SOURCES:

Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Sept. 9, 2011.

News release, CDC.

CDC web site: "Questions and Answers, Surveillance for Foodborne Disease Outbreaks, 2008."