



It's not just **Strawberries**

Food-Borne Illnesses on the Rise

Spinach. Peanut butter. And now strawberries.

These are some of the foods that have been recalled because they carried the bacteria that can cause food-borne illnesses. So what's the deal with these food-borne illnesses? And why are we hearing so much about them lately?

First off, the strawberries. Several batches of strawberries were recently found to be carrying *Listeria*, a particularly dangerous bacterium, especially for pregnant women, elderly people and children. In fact, pregnant women are 20 times more likely than anyone else to get sick from *Listeria*. About 2,500 people in the U.S. will get sick from *Listeria* this year and about 500 will die.

Now if those numbers sound scary but relatively small, consider this. *Listeria* is just one of the many causes of food-borne illnesses. The total number of Americans who get a food-borne illness each year is over 76 million. And that number is probably an underestimate, given that many of

*One in three
Americans will get
sick from something
they eat this year.*

these illnesses go unreported or are misdiagnosed. About 5,000 Americans die each year from food-borne illnesses.

Many food-borne illnesses go unreported or are wrongly diagnosed because their symptoms are so similar to those from other illnesses.

What is a food-borne illness? It's an illness that comes from eating food that's been contaminated with bacteria, viruses or other pathogens (with the vast majority caused by bacteria). Now this can actually get tricky, because some kinds of bacteria are good for us. They can help us digest our food and keep us well. But the nasty kinds of bacteria? Well, they can be very, very bad news for us.

As we wrote above, food-borne illnesses can be fatal. The most common symptoms, however, are generally far less serious for most people:

- Abdominal cramps
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Fever
- Dehydration

So how do the little monsters that cause these illnesses get into our food? It can happen at any point from the farm to your dinner table. The contamination can occur during:

- Food growing
- Harvesting
- Processing
- Storing
- Shipping
- Final preparation in your kitchen

In the case of the strawberries, some experts think they were contaminated while they were still in the ground. Irrigation water that was used to help the strawberries grow could have been polluted by runoff, water that drained from a nearby cattle ranch. If that runoff contained *Listeria* from the cattle's waste, then you've got strawberries that can make you sick.

So does that mean you shouldn't eat strawberries anymore? No way! As it turns out, most cases of food contamination are very, very isolated. It's generally just a small batch of any kind of food that's found to be carrying the dangerous bacteria. Modern technology and government regulations have gone a long way toward limiting food contamination and the food-borne illnesses that can be caused by it.

But if that's the case, why are we always hearing so much about food-borne illnesses? A couple of the reasons are surprising:

- People are eating more fresh fruits and vegetables than they did even 30 years ago. And very often they're eating these foods raw, for example in smoothies. (Cooking food properly usually kills harmful bacteria; raw foods, on the other hand, present more of a risk.)
- More so than in the past, the food we now buy has been "pooled." For example, the leaves in a bag of spinach may have come from several different plants. And the meat in a hamburger may have come from several different cows. If the food from just one of those sources is carrying harmful bacteria, it's likely to spread to all of the food. So one bad apple (or spinach leaf... or strawberry) really can ruin the whole batch.

Another key point about food-borne illnesses is that the bacteria that cause them can be carried by any kind of food, even the most expensive organic food you can buy at a natural food store.



Organic food is usually grown without pesticides and artificial fertilizers. And that's a very good thing. However, it doesn't protect organic food from becoming contaminated. The bacteria don't discriminate. They can be anywhere.

So what's the upshot of all this? We shouldn't freak out, but we should be careful. Eat good foods and know that your risk of getting sick from a food-borne illness is real but small. We should pay attention to announcements from public health officials and food producers about foods

that get recalled. And there's a lot we can do ourselves to prevent food-borne illnesses as well – happily, the web is filled with great resources on this topic.

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