

What You Don't See Could Kill You

We are in the midst of a multi-state outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7, linked to romaine lettuce grown in the Yuma, AZ region. Currently, this outbreak has sickened 53 people in 16 states, including Idaho and Washington, and it is likely that illnesses will continue until the contaminated lettuce has been completely removed from the food supply.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 in 6 Americans (48 million people) gets sick, 128,000 people are hospitalized, and 3,000 people will die of foodborne diseases each year. Romaine lettuce contaminated with *E. coli* is not the only concern. There are 31 known pathogens (illness causing bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites) that can cause foodborne illness, and no food is immune to carrying one of these insidious microorganisms.

Foodborne illness can be much more than a simple bout of the stomach flu; it can result in life-long health issues. For example, infection with *E. coli* O157:H7 results in severe stomach cramps, diarrhea (often bloody), and vomiting which usually lasts for 5-7 days. About 5-10% of infected people will develop a life-threatening complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) which can lead to kidney failure, and even death. Other long-term effects from foodborne illness can include reactive arthritis, ulcerative colitis, and Guillain-Barré syndrome.

Another microorganism of concern is *Listeria monocytogenes*. Originally, *Listeria* was associated with deli meats, hot dogs, and soft cheeses, but is now a growing concern in produce and dairy products. In 2016, a *Listeria* outbreak resulted in a recall of over 350 frozen vegetables and fruit, covering 42 brands. *Listeria* is the third leading cause of death from foodborne illness in the United States, and the mortality rates can be as high as 20-30%. Pregnant women are 10 times more likely to become infected. In addition, the mothers can pass the infection to their unborn babies causing miscarriages, stillbirths, preterm labor, and serious illness and death in newborns.

With all foodborne illness, there are certain groups of people that are at higher risk for illness and complications. These include individuals who are pregnant, aged 65 years or older, children ages 5 and under, or those with weakened immune systems such as cancer patients, diabetes patients, transplant recipients, people on immune suppressing medications, and those with HIV/AIDS.

Despite this alarming news, there are steps you can take to keep from getting sick. Both the USDA and Fight Bac! have listed four core practices for consumers to follow to help keep your food safe.

1. Clean

- Wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water before and after handling food
- Wash cutting boards, knives, utensils and counters with hot soapy water
- Rinse all fruits and vegetables under running water.

2. Separate

- Keep raw meat, poultry, eggs, and seafood away from other foods
- Do not use cutting boards, knives, utensils on ready to eat foods (e.g. produce) after being in contact with raw foods (e.g. meats) unless they have been thoroughly washed in hot soapy water first.

3. Cook

- Use a food thermometer
- Cook ground meat to 160° F, poultry to 165°F, roasts, steaks, whole cuts of pork and fish to 145°F

4. Chill

- Refrigerate foods at $\leq 40^{\circ}\text{F}$.
- Never let raw meat, poultry, eggs, cooked food or cut fresh fruits or vegetables sit at room temperature more than two hours, and never defrost food at room temperature.

And one more tip:

5. Keep food in the safe zone

- Keep hot foods hot ($> 140^{\circ}\text{F}$) and cold foods cold ($< 40^{\circ}\text{F}$)
- Perishable foods kept at temperatures between 40-140°F should be discarded after 2 hours.

By following these tips, you can keep you and your family safe from foodborne illness. For more information and tips on food safety and food preservation, contact your local county extension office.

Dr. Stephanie Smith is an Assistant professor and Statewide Consumer Food Safety Specialist for Washington State University Extension. She can be reached at food.safety@wsu.edu or at (855) 335-0575. Follow us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/wsuextfs/> or on Twitter at https://twitter.com/WSU_foodsafety.