



## **Food Safety FAQ**

### **1. Isn't our food supply adequately regulated already? Why do we need new laws?**

The laws that govern our food safety system are outdated; it has been decades since the last major change to the food safety law enforced by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was amended. In the intervening years, the way we produce, process, and prepare food has changed drastically.

### **2. Everyone gets sick from food poisoning once in awhile. Is this really a serious issue?**

Foodborne illness is not just a tummy ache. Each year, 76 million Americans – one in every four – are sickened by contaminated food. Though, fortunately, many recover within a few days, 325,000 people are hospitalized and 5,000 people die every year. Young children and the elderly – as well as people with weakened immune systems – are especially vulnerable to serious complications and even death. The proposed legislation would direct food producers and processors to develop safety plans that would help minimize the possibility of contamination and hopefully prevent many illnesses and deaths.

#### **Can we ever totally ensure the safety of our food supply?**

While we may not be able to totally eliminate all risks in the food supply, there is more that can be done to minimize many of the risks, particularly the risk of bacterial contamination. Measures such as express authority for the FDA to set safety standards, requirements that food producers establish safety plans, and enforcement tools that allow the FDA to hold companies that violate the law accountable for their actions will all go a long way towards enhancing food safety.

### **3. Isn't preventing foodborne illness the responsibility of consumers and how they prepare/store their food?**

Consumers have an important role to play in food safety, and need to follow safe-handling practices in order not to exacerbate existing contamination or cross-contaminate other foods. The proposed legislation, however, is aimed at preventing contamination from ever reaching kitchens and restaurants, to focus efforts at the source and at earlier points in the food supply chain. Prevention of foodborne contamination should be the responsibility of food producers and processors, with the federal government providing the proper oversight to assure that companies are meeting government safety standards. New legislation is needed to allow the FDA to follow a prevention-based approach.

**4. Isn't there some level of personal responsibility we must acknowledge (e.g., people need to wash their fruits and vegetables, store food in proper conditions, etc...)?**

Focusing on produce, even if consumers thoroughly wash their fruits and vegetables, won't necessarily eliminate bacterial contamination because the bacterial contamination may have penetrated through the rind or surface of the commodity. Since these food items are often eaten raw, there is no subsequent "kill step," like cooking, to destroy the bacteria. For this reason, steps should be taken to minimize the risk that produce is contaminated before it reaches your kitchen – during the growing, harvesting, packing, or distribution of these food items.

**5. How can we be sure that food is to blame when people get sick?**

The only way to be absolutely sure that a person has a foodborne illness is if his/her stool or blood sample is sent to a laboratory and it then tests positive for *Salmonella*, *E. coli O157:H7*, *Shigella* or other foodborne pathogens. Those results would then be compared to pathogens found in samples of contaminated food products, providing clear evidence that the contaminated food made the person sick. Because of the time, effort, and expense of making a confirmed diagnosis it is not surprising that the vast number of foodborne illnesses are not laboratory confirmed and therefore not included in official foodborne-illness data.

**6. What are the steps that need to be taken to ensure that our food is safe?**

There are many steps that can be taken to improve our food safety system. Legislation should:

- Require food processors to proactively identify where contamination can occur and take steps to prevent that contamination;
- Increase inspection of food-processing plants, with frequency of inspections tied to the risk of the product in question;
- Better ensure that imported food meets the same safety standards as food produced domestically;
- Direct that the FDA set science-based standards for pathogen reduction for foods, including fresh produce;
- Require food companies to test and sample food products for pathogens and report to the government test results showing harmful contamination;
- Provide the FDA with authority to require recall of contaminated products – something it cannot do under existing law. The government must also be given the authority to impose civil penalties or fines on manufacturers who do not follow food safety regulations; and
- Fund research on foodborne- illness surveillance.

**7. If a government inspector finds contaminated food, isn't it removed immediately from store shelves?**

Not necessarily. The FDA does not have the authority to force manufacturers and distributors to recall unsafe foods from our nation's grocery stores and shelves. Currently, it is up to manufacturers themselves to issue a recall, and while the vast majority of manufacturers are committed to food safety, recent outbreaks have highlighted the delays that can occur.

**8. The Peanut Corporation of America (PCA) was just one bad actor, and not representative of most food processors, right?**

While PCA (apparently) knowingly shipped tainted products, and we hope that this type of behavior is rare, we do believe that the holes in the existing food-safety net exposed by this case means that food companies may *unknowingly* be producing contaminating food items. To close up these holes, a new law should require food companies to develop prevention-based, food safety plans and to test their products for pathogens and report to the FDA results showing harmful contamination.