

Side-Step *Salmonella* with Safety Standards

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 47.8 million Americans experience foodborne illnesses each year with over 125,000 being hospitalized and over 3,000 deaths caused by these diseases (“Burden of Foodborne Illness: Findings”).

Foodborne illnesses are infectious diseases caused by the consumption of food contaminated with bacteria, viruses, pathogens, or toxins. Foodborne illnesses can be deadly and also hurt the economy due to increased healthcare costs and decreased attendance at work and school. The United States must improve education on the risks involved in meal preparation, the necessity of proper handwashing, and proper food preparation techniques. The Covid-19 pandemic has made individuals more conscious of diseases, so the time for community education is now.

One in six Americans are infected each year by contaminants, such as *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, botulism, *Listeria*, and Hepatitis A, and numbers are higher in parts of the world with less access to hygiene infrastructure. These diseases have the potential to affect everyone but are more detrimental to young children and the elderly. In 2011, *Listeria* infections from consuming contaminated cantaloupe caused the deaths of 33 citizens, most jeopardizing pregnant women and their unborn (Healthline Editorial Team). According to an estimate by the U.S. Food and Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service, the fifteen most major foodborne pathogens cost the country over \$17 billion in 2018 (“Cost Estimates of Foodborne Illnesses”).

The solution to this issue— food safety— is already present in restaurants and factories but must be made accessible to everyone. Food safety reduces the risk and spread of foodborne illnesses and prevents outbreaks by addressing food handling, storage, and preparation. Many adults lack knowledge of cross-contamination, proper sanitation, glove-wearing, food storage,

and cooking temperatures. By spreading knowledge about proper food handling techniques and handwashing to all ages, consumers, at-home chefs, and families can better protect themselves. With these measures foodborne illnesses can be easily prevented, especially in the U.S. where access to indoor plumbing and cleaning products is widely available.

There exists a lack of education around this topic. A study of American university students found that “Participants engaged in less than half of the recommended safe food-handling practices evaluated and correctly answered only two-thirds of the food safety knowledge items,” while indicating that they believed they were at low-risk for foodborne illness and taking proper precautions (Abbot). Currently, adolescents only learn about foodborne illnesses and how to prevent them in a Family and Consumer Science class, which is not required. This propels a dangerous cycle: when no one teaches younger generations, it carries over to all aspects of society and into adulthood.

Communities must provide access to food safety training and make it widely available. The government by way of public education can be a partner in this initiative. School systems could provide training for all high school students that must be completed in order to graduate. By also providing information on social media and online trainings, state health departments can meet people where they are at— not all training has to be formal to be effective. Another way to increase food safety is to provide free Servsafe certification for all employees handling food or incentivize it with bonuses. The government could support this initiative by offering benefits to companies that require or incentivize certification.

Another way this information is relevant to us today is the spread of Covid-19. There has recently been an increase in sanitary measures and handwashing. As the community and organizations are already raising awareness of these important health practices, parents, teachers,

and employers can inform others on how these practices can improve our health in other ways. This is where food safety can easily be implemented into society. We are already adding measures such as increased hand washing, more frequent disinfection, masks, and gloves. These measures, while not intended to reduce foodborne illnesses, have proven to work. As stated by Food Safety News, "Foodborne illnesses in the United States decreased by 26 percent in 2020 compared with the average from 2017-19... The researchers speculated that pandemic-related behaviors, such as more handwashing, less international travel, and restaurant closures, may have contributed to the decrease in foodborne illnesses" (Beach). This data is not perfect, in that changes in healthcare could have caused underreporting, but this is a relevant example of how education and implementation of stricter sanitation measures are effective and can help save lives.

Increased education and sanitary measures are easy ways to save many lives. Caring for ourselves and others in this way requires little effort but can result in big rewards.

Works Cited

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