

Over 75 infected and 1 killed so far by McDonald's E. coli outbreak

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28 October 2024

In recent months, several outbreaks of foodborne illnesses have been reported across the US, resulting in the hospitalizations of nearly 100 people and the deaths of 11, as well as massive food recalls by the companies involved, raising profound concerns about the safety of the \$1 trillion US food industry.

Most recently, US fast-food chain McDonald's has removed the Quarter Pounder from its menu at one-fifth of all its 14,000 US locations across 13 states in the Midwest and some Western states, due to an outbreak of the highly virulent *Escherichia coli* O157:h7 (*E. coli*). The outbreak of illnesses that occurred from September 27, 2024, to October 11, 2024, has infected at least 75 people, hospitalizing 22 and killing one. The source has been identified as raw onions procured from Taylor Farms.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and FDA investigation is ongoing, the supplier of the yellow onions has issued a recall and notified other food service customers to whom it had sold the contaminated produce. These developments have led chains like Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC and Burger King to remove fresh onions from their food products at similar locations.

Attorney Mike Taylor, with decades of work in the FDA and USDA, who serves on the board of the non-profit public health organization Stop Foodborne Illness, (founded after the 1992-1993 Jack in the Box *E. coli* outbreak that infected 732 people and killed four children) said, "Produce is a much harder problem," than meats which, if cooked through, can prevent such health issues.

Fresh produce, because it is frequently consumed raw, poses a considerable challenge for large-scale industrial produce. Despite washing, sanitation and testing, low levels of contamination can go undetected and lead to the outbreak of foodborne illnesses. *E. coli* from feces, a normal pathogen in the intestines of animals such as cattle, that has also been detected in wild animals like

geese, boars, deer and others, can contaminate water sources that lead to such outbreaks.

Bill Marler, a Seattle-based lawyer representing victims of such outbreaks for more than 30 years, told the *Washington Post* that more than just the testing of water used to grow produce is required. He noted that the testing of irrigation water and the regulations that keep cattle feedlots away from farmland that grow produce is vital. A 2018 study by the FDA on an *E. coli* outbreak linked to romaine lettuce from Yuma, Arizona, found samples of the deadly bacteria in canal water. As the *Post* report stated, "[dust] from nearby concentrated cattle-feeding operations may play a role in contaminating irrigation waters."

Although the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the USDA agency responsible for meat, egg, catfish and poultry supply, have attempted to assure the public that food safety remains paramount and that food recalls have dropped from 131 in 2019 to 89 last year, Marler called these figures and the manner they are being presented as problematic, adding, "The more recalls there are, frankly, the safer our food supply is."

Indeed, the July recall of over 70 products by the giant deli meat company, Boar's Head, after a nationwide *Listeria* outbreak, underscores the disastrous state of food safety in the US. That outbreak resulted in 10 deaths and 59 hospitalizations, with the CDC noting at the time, "This is the largest listeriosis outbreak since the 2011 outbreak linked to cantaloupe."

Investigation into the outbreak led to the identification of the source of contamination at the company's southern Virginia plant and the production of liverwurst. In 2022, two years prior to the July outbreak, after an extensive inspection of the Jarratt, Virginia, Boar's Head facility, US inspectors warned that the conditions at the plant posed an "imminent threat" to public health. They said that cured meats were exposed to wet ceilings, buildup of

mold and mildew on surfaces, especially around handwashing sinks and steel vats, and unrepaired holes in the walls.

In another line of the inspection, they wrote, “A black mold like substance was seen throughout the room at the wall/concrete junction. As well as some caulking around brick/metal as large as a quarter.” In yet another line, inspectors found “ample amounts of blood in puddles on the floor and rancid smells” throughout a cooler used at the plant. According to information obtained by *CBS News* through a Freedom of Information Act, they noted there had been 69 recorded safety violations by inspectors since then that had not been remedied.

Boar’s Head has been forced to close the facility, and 500 working class jobs have been terminated at the small rural town whose economic well-being depended on the plant’s operations. It remains to be seen if the company will face any penalties from the USDA, which, at the time, only provided a brief statement, writing, “FSIS has suspended inspection at the Boar’s Head establishment in Jarratt, Virginia, which means that it remains closed until the establishment is able to demonstrate it can produce safe product.”

Sarah Sorscher, a food safety regulatory expert at the Center for Science in Public Interest, said bluntly on the *Listeria* outbreak, Boar’s Head criminal negligence and the culpability of the USDA, FDA and CDC: “They shouldn’t have allowed this company to keep producing ready-to-eat products, lunch meat that’s going to go on people’s tables, when they’re seeing this level of violation. Consumers had to die before this plant got shut down, really is the bottom line.”

Given these developments, it is not surprising that public confidence in the food industry and the food supply has reached, as the *Post* poll notes, “an all-time low.” Hypocritically, the paper that called for the return of children to COVID-infested schools during the worst stages of the pandemic and supported the Biden administration’s “forever COVID” policy, has connected the mistrust in the federal public health agencies responsible for food safety with the general mistrust that has been engendered in “government, science and expertise,” and with the “downward spiral that began during the pandemics and hasn’t eased up.”

Former FDA deputy commissioner for food policy and response, Frank Yiannas, who is a microbiologist by training, speaking on the politicization of food safety and public health, remarked that this is “a global trust bust.” Yiannas noted that it was more than misinformation, but

the “genuine sense” of a complete letdown by the institutions that were supposed to protect them.

Commenting on the Boar’s Head disaster, *Bloomberg News* observed, “Government regulation acts mostly as a restrictor plate on the speed of progress and profit, and only when industries remove that burden can the companies within them reach their full potential.” They later explained:

The meat processing industry, however, has made its preferences clear. Time and again, industrial meat processors have urged federal officials to let them take more liberties and enforce more of their own safety standards, and, thanks to a federal food-safety apparatus that a 2021 ProPublica investigation described as ‘baffling and largely toothless,’ the industry has prevailed in many of those fights.

The US food industry is worth more than \$1 trillion and accounts for roughly 10 percent of all American jobs. The CDC estimates that each year around 48 million Americans fall sick from foodborne illnesses. Close to 130,000 people are hospitalized from complications associated with eating contaminated food and around 3,000 people die yearly. There are currently 10 ongoing investigations by the FDA, nine of which they have yet to determine which products are linked to these illnesses caused by *Listeria*, *E. Coli*, *Salmonella* and *Cyclospora*.

Placing the current crisis in the US in the global context, according to the United Nations’ Global Food Security Index, “Structural issues in the global food system led growth to slow subsequently, and for the past three years the trend in the overall food security environment has reversed.” Additionally, sharp rises in food prices and a decline in availability and sustainability have contributed to these problems. Each year worldwide, unsafe foods cause 600 million cases of foodborne diseases and 420,000 deaths.



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