

New case estimates show foodborne illness still a big problem

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(PhysOrg.com) -- New estimates on the number of foodborne illness cases that occur each year in the United States, just released by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, show that food safety remains a concern in this country, according to an expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

The new report states that about 48 million people, or one in six Americans, become ill from the consumption of [contaminated food](#) annually. Of this number, about 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die.

"These numbers are lower than CDC previously estimated in 1999," said

Catherine Cutter, associate professor of [food science](#). "While there has been a drop in the actual number of foodborne illness cases monitored by the CDC over the last decade, the decrease of the estimated cases -- from 76 to 48 million -- may be attributed to better data collection.

"While we have done a good job of improving food safety, the CDC estimates show that there still is a lot of work to do," Cutter added.

Of the 48 million cases, an estimated 9.4 million were from one of 31 microbial agents, while the cause of most other cases is unknown. Approximately 90 percent of the 9.4 million estimated illnesses were due to seven pathogens, Cutter noted -- Salmonella, Norovirus, [Campylobacter](#), [Toxoplasma](#), E.coli O157:H7, [Listeria monocytogenes](#), and Clostridium perfringens.

"Of these organisms, Salmonella was the leading cause of foodborne illness resulting in hospitalizations and deaths," Cutter said.

"These estimates are important because they give regulatory agencies, consumer groups, academics, public-health officials and industry personnel a measure of the impact of foodborne illness on our society."

According to Cutter, the data demonstrate that there is a lot of work to do throughout the "farm-to-fork" continuum, referring to what happens to food from when it is harvested in the field to what the consumer does while preparing and handling it.

"Individuals working in every segment of the food chain must be knowledgeable about handling food properly," she said. "They must understand how they can reduce the risk of foodborne illness."

She advises that consumers remember four basic principles of food safety:

- CLEAN: Wash hands and surfaces to remove any pathogenic organisms;
- SEPARATE: Raw and cooked foods should be kept apart to prevent cross contamination;
- COOK: Cook foods to a proper internal temperature with a properly calibrated thermometer to kill bacteria that may be present; and
- CHILL: Refrigerate foods promptly to prevent growth of harmful bacteria.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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