

Field of germs: Food safety is in farm worker's hands

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The recent salmonella outbreak linked to 575 illnesses and eight deaths across 43 states was shown to come from a dirty peanut processing plant in Georgia. And while it is essential for food processing plants to be clean and sanitary, Temple public health professor Jennifer Ibrahim, Ph.D., says officials need to consider other possible sources of illness.

"Right now, all of the focus is on the state of the peanut processing plant, but no one is really looking at the bigger picture — where else can illness be passed along to the food?" she said.

In a report published in the March issue of the *Journal of Environmental Health*, Ibrahim specifically highlights farm workers themselves — those who handle the food before it even gets to the plants — as another potential source for food borne illness.

"Farm workers tend to be a transitory group, so you might have someone working in the field who hasn't been doing this for very long, and might not be aware that what they're doing can be harmful," said Ibrahim.

She adds that farm workers aren't required to be vaccinated, which presents an increased threat for the spread of disease, particularly among foods that do not require cooking.

"The current food safety system is very reactive in that policies aren't really looked at until a major event happens," said Ibrahim. "But how often do you hear about friends or family having a bout of food poisoning? It highlights a need to be proactive and re-evaluate the processes of the FDA and USDA to ensure things don't fall through the cracks."

In her report, Ibrahim lists a few basic practices that can help prevent the spread of food borne disease by farm workers:

Vaccinate all workers at hire. Ibrahim notes that farm workers typically only spend about 150 days on a particular farm before moving onto the next. To prevent workers from contracting and spreading infection, she suggests vaccinating each worker on their hire date. "Preventing cases of food borne illness are more cost-effective than treating them," she said.

Get tough on enforcing the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Many companies are lax in providing their farm workers with adequate plumbing and hand washing facilities in the field, a requirement of the act, passed in 1970. "Not providing workers with the appropriate amenities for waste disposal and hand washing increases the risk of outbreaks of illnesses like E. coli and Salmonella," said Ibrahim.

Provide understandable information on sanitation. Because many field workers are immigrants, Ibrahim says it's imperative to provide culturally competent ways to educate workers about disease prevention and treatment.

"By setting these practices, it can only serve to help the public, not just by preventing illness but improving the overall quality of the food supply," said Ibrahim. "And that could result in better health outcomes, both here and around the world."

Source: Temple University

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