

A Consumer's Guide to Monitoring and Preventing Foodborne Illness Outbreaks

*By the Water Quality & Health Council
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News of recent foodborne illness outbreaks from purchased pre-cut melon, shell eggs, romaine lettuce and even breakfast cereal reminds us that although the US food supply is one of the safest in the world, food-related risks still exist. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) estimates](#) 48 million people get sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die each year in the US from foodborne illnesses.



A foodborne outbreak occurs when two or more people get sick from the same contaminated food or drink. According to CDC, most reported outbreaks of gastrointestinal illnesses occur in one state or in a small part of a state. In those instances, local or state health departments take the lead in identifying and investigating the outbreak. CDC may provide consultation, especially when outbreaks are large and severe.

Monitoring Local Foodborne Illness Outbreaks

Local foodborne outbreaks may be associated with restaurants, food trucks or food markets. Consumers may learn of these through traditional news sources, such as television, radio, or newspapers, or online sources, including websites and social media. Additionally, health departments regularly post inspection scores for food-related businesses to ensure employees are following safe food handling procedures that help avoid these outbreaks. These include ensuring adequate hand washing facilities and properly sanitizing food-contact surfaces to avoid cross-contamination.

To help avoid foodborne illness, consumers can consult inspection scores before patronizing restaurants, food trucks and food markets. Los Angeles County, California, for example, posts inspection scores for those establishments (and even housing and

swimming pools) [on one web page](#). Visitors to the page can sort information electronically by the type of establishment and by alphabetical listings of establishments. It is even possible to “drill down” to obtain information on the nature of violations.

Monitoring Multistate Foodborne Illness Outbreaks

CDC takes the lead role in large, multi-state foodborne illness outbreaks. Since 2006, CDC [investigated 117 multistate outbreaks¹](#) ranging from *E. coli*-contaminated [flour](#) to *Listeria*-contaminated [frozen vegetables](#). [CDC detects multistate outbreaks](#) by monitoring nationwide surveillance systems that track disease. The agency often partners in multi-state outbreak investigations with county, city and state health departments, the US Food and Drug Administration and the US Department of Agriculture. CDC gathers evidence linking outbreaks to a likely food or animal source, and then communicates to consumers and retailers about the source of the outbreak to help prevent additional illnesses.

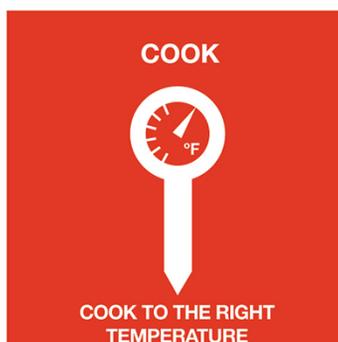
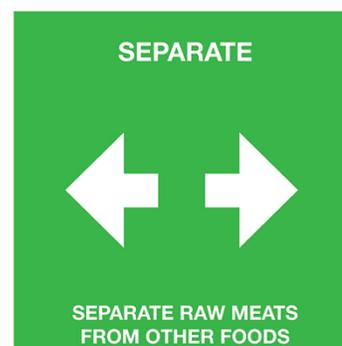
Multistate foodborne illness outbreaks are generally reported in the national media, but proactive consumers can follow CDC-reported outbreaks [online](#) for more timely information (email updates are available by signing up on the [CDC Current Outbreak List web page](#)). Another helpful resource is the prominent “Recalls and Alerts” section of [Foodsafety.gov](#). Consumers can stay connected to Foodsafety.gov through [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#). For a broader sampling of breaking news on public health, including foodborne outbreaks, visit CDC’s Twitter (<https://twitter.com/cdcgov>) and Facebook pages (<https://www.facebook.com/CDC/>).

Preventing Foodborne Illness in Your Home

If you have and use a kitchen, your home is a food establishment! Although not subject to health department inspections, it should be subject to *your* frequent inspection for the following best practices, based on information on [Foodsafety.gov](#):

1. **Clean** your hands and food-contact surfaces often; sanitize food-contact surfaces with a freshly made solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid bleach in 1 gallon of water. Wash fruits and vegetables before peeling or otherwise preparing them, but *do not* wash meat, poultry, or eggs. (See this USDA article: [Washing Food: Does it Promote Food Safety?](#))

2. **Separate** raw meats, poultry, seafood, and eggs from other foods



¹ As of June 21, 2018

in your grocery cart, [reusable grocery bags](#), and your refrigerator. Use separate cutting boards and plates for produce and raw meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs.

3. **Cook** foods to a [safe internal temperature](#); check temperature using a food thermometer.

4. **Chill** foods in your refrigerator at a temperature no higher than 40 degrees F. Chill foods in the refrigerator or freezer within 2 hours of their being at room temperature. If the air temperature is greater than 90 degrees F, return foods to the refrigerator within 1 hour.

We all have a role to play in reducing foodborne illness. Stay aware and stay well!

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