

## Sick of Food Safety? Never!

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A hundred unlucky folks got sick from eating at the [Food Safety Summit](#) [1] held a few weeks back at the Baltimore Convention Center. All I came home with as a container of [Old Bay Seasoning](#) [2] and a boatload of business cards.

The annual summit gathers experts from the Food and Drug Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture and industry food safety pros. This year's event was heavy on the [Food Safety and Modernization Act](#) [3], [traceability](#) [4] and corporate responsibility. The 100 reported illnesses out of 1,300 attendees represent a microcosm of the global food environment. That small percentage of sick folks highlights the fact that foodborne illnesses are easily spread and contracted. One slip up, one cross-contamination, one forgotten hand-wash and you have a wide-scale problem to deal with. It can happen to any food manufacturer.

The most recent estimate from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention is that roughly 1 in 6 Americans, or 48 million people are sickened by foodborne illnesses annually. Of those 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases. Whether the pathogen, such as E. coli, listeria or salmonella, originates with the supplier, manufacturer, retailer or food service provider doesn't matter to the person who contracts it. This 16 percent of the public. Statistically, about 100 of attendees escaped foodborne illness in that scenario, though I doubt every attendee ate the yet-to-be-determined offending food. Still, that statistic is little consolation to those who left Baltimore with an unwanted souvenir, but it's something. (Sidenote: I took home some delicious.

While the rash of illnesses is undoubtedly embarrassing for the summit's organizers,

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there's little they had to do with it. Event organizers are often contractually obligated to serve food supplied by the convention centers.

But all of the information spread at the Food Safety Summit to combat foodborne illnesses and support food safety will span far beyond the 100 who got sick. While I sympathize with them, because anyone who's contracted a foodborne illness of any degree can recall that agony, I refuse to see the math as anything but a positive. Methods of detecting, reporting and tracing foodborne illness are more powerful than ever before. Within days of the outbreak, I was alerted by an email survey from the City of Baltimore. The survey capriciously drilled me on what I ate at the conference and when. It's tough to recall your exact meals at a networking function, particularly those with free drinks. But the effort was quickly made to gather, analyze and report data, another testament to the food safety system.

Think of all of the food you eat within a week, a month, a year. It's surprising that food poisoning doesn't happen more regularly. In a global food system, this rarity indicates that we're on the right path. Continued illnesses and deaths, for example, the [Jensen Farms](#) [5] listeria outbreak of 2011, are a reminder that the food industry has more work to do, from securing their supply lines and enforcing manufacturing practices, to informing consumers on how to protect themselves against foodborne pathogens.

Until next year's Food Safety Summit, watch what you eat!

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[2] <http://www.oldbay.com/products/old-bay-seasoning.aspx>

[3] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/04/buyer%E2%80%99s-perspective-fsma-food-safety-summit>

[4] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/04/industry-wide-fsma-concerns-arise-food-safety-summit>

[5] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/01/cantaloupe-farmers-get-probation-fatal-outbreak>