

Food Safety Expert Discusses Failures In Risk Communication

MANHATTAN, Kan. (Newswise) — The recent decision by supermarket giant Kroger to stop selling fresh sprouts is important for public health and shows why risk communication messages must be improved at all levels, according to a Kansas State University food safety expert.

Doug Powell, professor of food safety in the university's College of Veterinary Medicine, is the co-author of a recent article in the journal *Food Control* titled "Failures in sprouts-related risk communication."

The popularity of fresh sprouts has been on the rise in recent years because of an increasing perception that they provide health and nutritional benefits. But Powell said incidences of foodborne outbreaks linked to sprouts have also grown along with the popularity of raw sprouted seed products.

"In the past two decades, sprouted seeds have been a recurring food safety concern, with at least 55 documented foodborne outbreaks affecting more than 15,000 people," he said.

Powell said sprouts can be dangerous because they are grown in an environment that is ideal for bacteria to flourish.

One of the highest-profile recent outbreaks linked to sprouts involved the sandwich franchise Jimmy John's, according to Powell. From November 2010 into 2011, 140 people were sickened after consuming contaminated sprouts linked to the sandwich shop chain. Jimmy John's then announced that it would replace the alfalfa sprouts used on its sandwiches with clover sprouts, claiming the clover sprouts were easier to clean.

However, the sandwich chain was again linked to a sprout-related E. coli outbreak in December 2011, less than one year after making the switch to clover sprouts. In February 2012, Jimmy John's announced that it would permanently remove raw sprouts from its menu.

Despite the deaths due to contaminated sprouts and the scientific evidence of the dangers of consuming them, Powell said the risks were not communicated to the public adequately.

Powell said problems with risk communication are not limited to the U.S. and Canada. He and his article co-authors noted that in 2011 the delayed reporting of cases between European agencies due to a decentralized government was a contributing factor in the Germany-based E. coli O104 outbreak, linked to contaminated sprouts, that led to 53 deaths and more than 4,000 sick people.

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For the article, a compilation of selected publications was used to yield an analysis of the evolving safety and risk communication related to raw sprouts, including microbiological safety, efforts to improve production practices and effectiveness of communication prior to, during and after sprout-related outbreaks.

Powell said the good news is that scientific investigation and media coverage of sprout-related outbreaks has led to improved production guidelines and public health enforcement actions, yet continued outbreaks call into question the effectiveness of risk management strategies and producer compliance.

"Inconsistent communication of the risks involved with eating fresh sprouts on the part of worldwide governments and the food production industry has led to low public awareness of the dangers of sprouts, and is part of the reason for recurring outbreaks over the last several decades," he said. "To minimize health risks linked to the consumption of sprout products, local and national public health agencies, restaurants, retailers and producers need validated, consistent and repeated risk messaging through a variety of sources."

Powell said making sure sprouts are fully cooked before eating can help curtail the risks of foodborne illness. But he said even with the thorough cooking, sprouts still have a high risk of cross-contamination.

Lead author of the journal article is Maria Sol Erdozain Paterno, a graduate student in marriage and family therapy and research assistant at Kansas State University. Along with Powell, co-authors include Katija Morley, a research assistant at Kansas State University, and Kevin Allen of the University of British Columbia. The article is available at <http://bit.ly/Y4n92m> [1].

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