

Basic Facts about the Tomato Scare

Just when we think we're safe, another nationwide outbreak of foodborne illness occurs to shake us out of our complacency.

The most recent involves three different varieties of tomatoes — raw red Roma, red plum and round red tomatoes. As of June 11, the date of this writing, these tainted tomatoes are believed to be the source of 167 reported cases of salmonella in 17 states, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

Following is a series of questions and answers dealing with issues of the most likely concern to consumers:

Are all tomatoes currently unsafe to eat?

No, only those types that have been identified by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration: raw red Roma, raw red plum and raw round red tomatoes.

Why is the FDA including raw red round tomatoes on the list? Aren't all tomatoes red and round?

A standard practice following an outbreak is to interview affected people. Many affected people could report nothing more definitive than that the tomatoes were red and round.

Which tomatoes are considered safe?

The FDA is advising consumers to limit consumption of tomatoes to the following types: cherry tomatoes, grape tomatoes, tomatoes sold with the vine still attached, and home-grown tomatoes.

Are Alabama-grown tomatoes considered safe?

Yes. Alabama-grown tomatoes are safe to eat and have been placed on the FDA's safe-to-eat list. The Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries reports that state tomato growers have not been adversely affected by the salmonella outbreak.

Are tomatoes any more susceptible to foodborne illness than other produce?

While widely considered to be a highly nutritious source of lycopene and other antioxidants, the tomato does possess two Achilles' heels: a thin skin and stem scar, the part of the tomato severed from the vine. Through small lesions on the skin and stem, tainted water and other pathogens can seep in and eventually contaminate the interior of the fruit, much like a tiny pin prick on a hermetically sealed package. The same holds true for apples, grapes and other stemmed fruits.

Other stemmed plants, such as watermelons and cantaloupes are not as susceptible to foodborne illness, because the stems typically contract, allowing fewer openings for exposure.

How could contamination have occurred?

With tomatoes and other types of produce, contamination conceivably can occur at any point from farm to plate. Contamination could have occurred from something in the soil, from tainted irrigation water, or from water used to bathe the tomatoes following harvest. Improper handling in the course of harvesting or processing could also prove to be the cause.

What are salmonella?

Salmonella are bacteria named after Daniel E. Salmon, the man who discovered them. They typically are associated with undercooked poultry, though they can contaminate many different types of products.

Symptoms associated with salmonellosis, the condition that often follows exposure to the bacteria, include diarrhea and abdominal cramping, typically occur within 6 to 48 hours after exposure and may be accompanied by fever, headaches, nausea and vomiting. Complications may include blood poisoning, meningitis and bone-joint infections.

Although anyone can acquire a salmonellosis infection, the risk is highest in infants, young children, senior citizens, and others with lowered natural resistance to disease. Pregnancy, cancer, chemotherapy, organ transplant, diabetes and liver problems pose particular risks.

How common is salmonellosis?

Each year, some 40,000 cases of salmonellosis are reported in the United States.

Though Salmonella only accounts for about 10 percent of cases related to food poisoning, it is responsible for almost a third of deaths associated with foodborne illness.

Is there any way to prevent salmonellosis?

There is no foolproof way to avoid foodborne illness in fruits and vegetables, especially in cases such as these where the interior of the produce is contaminated. In such cases, cooking provides the most effective safeguard.

However, as a general rule, all produce should be washed in cold running water before consumption, scrubbing the products gently with your hands or with a vegetable brush. In the case of vegetables such as cabbage and lettuce, the outer layers should be removed

as a standard practice before washing. With the exception of bananas, all fruits should be washed, regardless of whether the peel is eaten.

Another effective safeguard is avoiding cross-contamination. Cutting boards and counters should be washed thoroughly. Any sort of contact with raw meat should be especially avoided.

If the U.S. food supply is the safest in the world, why do we continue experiencing these types of foodborne outbreaks?

We are increasingly eating from an international table, made up of foods grown around the world. While this increasingly complex food production and distribution system has afforded us many benefits in terms of convenience, affordability and diversity in the types of food we eat, it also has a tendency to magnify the effects of human error along the production or distribution chain. Even as the overall risks of foodborne illness decline, there will still be those rare instances when one mistake during processing or distribution could lead to the sickening of hundreds of thousands of consumers.