



Bulletin No. 16

April 3, 1997

April is Food Safety Awareness Month

Foodborne diseases are illnesses acquired after eating contaminated food. Foodborne disease outbreaks are recognized by the occurrence of illness among a group of persons usually within a short time period after food consumption. Ill persons often attribute their illness to the most recently consumed meal; however, because incubation periods for many foodborne pathogens (such as *Salmonella* species) range from 18-72 hours, this conclusion is often erroneous. Single cases of foodborne disease are almost impossible to identify with the exception of botulism, trichinosis, and paralytic shellfish poisoning. Pathogens responsible for foodborne diseases are also transmittable through other mechanisms such as person-to-person, or directly from an infected animal.

Numerous foodborne disease outbreaks have been investigated in Alaska during the past 10 years (Table 1). A variety of foods and pathogens were implicated; temperature abuse and ill food handlers were often identified. The pathogen was laboratory confirmed for 8 (32%) of the 25 investigations - this is comparable to nationwide data for 1988-92 in which 36-45% of foodborne outbreaks had a pathogen confirmed. Illness caused significant morbidity, sometimes resulting in hospitalization and occasionally death.

Each year, Alaska has outbreaks of foodborne botulism and paralytic shellfish poisoning (not shown in Table 1) which are potentially life-threatening public health emergencies. In addition, there have been outbreaks of trichinosis (from consumption of bear or walrus meat) and sporadic cases of *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 and *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*.

Foodborne illness is preventable. Attention to proper foodhandling and foodhandler hygiene is critical. The Environmental Sanitation and Food Safety Program of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), in conjunction with several other organizations, is offering educational opportunities for foodservice employees, managers, and consumers during April, Food Safety Awareness Month. Additional information can be obtained by calling DEC at 1-907-451-2112 or from their website at www.state.ak.us/dec/deh/sanitat/homesan.htm.

Suspected outbreaks of foodborne illness should be promptly reported to the Section of Epidemiology by calling 1-907-269-8000 during regular business hours or 1-800-478-0084 after hours. In addition, all laboratory confirmed cases of any reportable enteric pathogen - even if not suspected to be outbreak-connected - should be reported (Table 2). Health-care providers evaluating persons ill with diarrhea should consider obtaining a stool sample for bacterial culture - in many circumstances, testing at the State Public Health Laboratory is available free-of-charge, contact the Section of Epidemiology for assistance. **Botulism and paralytic shellfish poisoning are public health emergencies - they should be immediately reported 24 hours -a-day by calling 1-800-478-0084.**

Table 1. Selected* foodborne disease outbreaks, Alaska, 1987-1996.

Date	Event	No. Attended	No. Ill	Implicated Food	Pathogen**	Deficiency
12/96	Fishing boat, Bering Sea	27	13	unknown	hepatitis A	Ill foodhandler
8/95	Picnic and luncheon, Anchorage	496	68	potato salad	(Norwalk-like virus)	Ill foodhandlers
6/94	Restaurant, Fairbanks	—	3	unknown	(<i>Bacillus cereus</i>)	unknown
11/93	Convention, Anchorage	315	67	reindeer pate	unknown	Temperature abuse
6/93	Restaurant, Fairbanks	—	6	pizza	(<i>S. aureus</i>)	Ill foodhandler
3/93	Restaurant, Anchorage	40	20	rice?	<i>Bacillus cereus</i>	Temperature abuse
9/92	Restaurant, Fairbanks	12	9	cream sauce	(<i>S. aureus</i>)	Temperature abuse
7/92	Catered picnic, Juneau	200-300	22	pork	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i>	Temperature abuse
6/92	Restaurant, Juneau	—	12	sandwiches	hepatitis A	Ill foodhandler
6/92	School trip, Kenai	36	21	spaghetti sauce	unknown	Temperature abuse
11/91	Restaurant, Delta Junction	—	5	taco meat	(<i>Cl. perfringens</i>)	Temperature abuse
11/91	Restaurant, Fairbanks	—	2	meatballs	(<i>S. aureus</i>)	Temperature abuse
11/91	Restaurant, Fairbanks	—	6	steak fingers	unknown	Temperature abuse
8/91-9/91	Potlatch, Galena & 3 other villages	—	53	moose soup	<i>Shigella sonnei</i>	Ill foodhandlers
6/91	Campers, Cooper Landing	66	38	chili	<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>	Temperature abuse
12/89	Christmas party, Anchorage	38	27	unknown	unknown	unknown
12/88	Christmas party, Anchorage	111	~36	prime rib?	<i>Clostridium perfringens</i>	Numerous
9/88	Restaurant, Fairbanks	—	10	unknown	unknown	Ill foodhandler
8/88	Restaurant, Denali	—	4	ribs	<i>Bacillus cereus</i>	Temperature abuse
6/88	Catered meal, Trail River Camp	40	25	cream sauce	(<i>Cl. perfringens</i> or <i>B. cereus</i>)	Temperature abuse
12/87	Restaurant, Anchorage	22	10	beef tostada	unknown	Ill foodhandler
11/87	Restaurant, Anchorage	16	7	hamburger	unknown	unknown
10/87	Birthday party, Fairbanks	18	10	unknown	unknown	Temperature abuse
6/87	Conference, Fairbanks	37	29	hollandaise sauce	(<i>Bacillus cereus</i>)	unknown
4/87	Restaurant, Anchorage	—	3	unknown	(<i>S. aureus</i> or <i>B. cereus</i>)	unknown

Notes:
* Does not include cases of botulism (n=93), paralytic shellfish poisoning (n=71), or trichinosis (n=80).
** Pathogens shown in parenthesis were suspected but not laboratory confirmed.

Table 2. Reportable enteric diseases.

• Amebiasis	• Hepatitis A
• Botulism	• Paralytic shellfish poisoning
• Brucellosis	• Salmonellosis
• Campylobacteriosis	• Shigellosis
• Cholera	• Trichinosis
• Cryptosporidiosis	• Tularemia
• <i>Escherichia coli</i> O157:H7 infection	• Yersiniosis
• Giardiasis	

(Contributed by Michael Beller, MD, MPH, and Sue Anne Jenkerson, RNC, MSN, FNC, Section of Epidemiology)