Keeping food safer with irradiation

By ACSH Staff — May 14, 2012

A Mother’s Day garden party at an upstate New York Buddhist monastery took a turn for the worse after 150 attendees fell ill with food poisoning and many had to be hospitalized. And while it seems as though we’re always reading about the latest food-borne outbreak (recent stories included listeria-tainted cantaloupe and salmonella-tainted eggs), in reality, the rate of food-borne illness in the U.S. fell by almost 25 percent [1] since the late 1990s, according to a new report from the CDC.

That doesn’t mean, however, that there’s no room for improvement, especially since recent statistics indicate that the rate has remained stagnant between 2006 and 2010. And although the CDC researchers included six types of food-related bacteria in their rate calculations, the analysis excluded norovirus, which is by far the most common non-bacterial food-borne pathogen. As Dr. Bloom adds, This one will not be so easy to tackle. It is the most infectious entity on earth, and is very hard to kill.

Yet taken together, the results from such studies can contribute to the development of policies and interventions that will ultimately lead to reductions in the incidence of food-borne infections, says Dr. Olga Henao, leader of the CDC’s Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network Team.

It’s too bad Dr. Henao had nothing more productive to suggest than this bland assessment, says ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross. He also notes that ACSH has long maintained that one such important intervention is food irradiation, an effective yet underused method of preventing food-borne infection. Using low-dose X-rays, electron beams, or gamma rays, food irradiation has the potential to protect a wide variety of products from contamination, including produce and meat, and kills toxigenic E. coli.

ACSH’s nutrition expert, Dr. Ruth Kava, adds, The unfounded superstitious fear of food irradiation by many consumers, along with the agenda-driven opposition to it by groups such as CSPI, has prevented this useful and safe technology from being widely accepted. Ongoing food-borne epidemics result in part from underuse of irradiation.