Eating Safely: Avoiding Foodborne Illness (second edition)

By ACSH Staff — June 1, 1999

Introduction

Food safety is a matter of great interest and serious concern to consumers in the 1990s. But today's media, armed with red-flag words such as "toxin" and "carcinogen," often report alleged health hazards in the American diet as fact. This has led many consumers to believe, erroneously, that our modern food supply is inherently dangerous because it contains such synthetic chemicals as food additives and pesticide residues.

The real news tells another story, however. Reports of recent outbreaks of illness caused by the bacterium Escherichia coli O157:H7 (transmitted via hamburgers, apple juice, and sprouts); by various species of Salmonella bacteria (transmitted via orange juice, eggs, and sprouts); and by the bacterium Listeria monocytogenes (transmitted via soft cheeses and processed meats) have demonstrated that microbial hazards are more significant for food safety than are hazards associated with food additives and pesticide residues.

With the advent of the federal government's Food Safety Initiative in May 1997, the nation's attention was directed toward the real hazards: foodborne diseases caused by such microbes as bacteria, viruses, molds, and some parasites. This redirection puts food safety concerns into the appropriate order, as based on scientific documentation.

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