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The CDC estimates that food borne pathogens cause 76 million illnesses per year in the U.S., resulting in 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,200 deaths.

Recently, the Jensen Farms Listeria outbreak affecting cantaloupes across the country has been heralded as the deadliest outbreak of foodborne illness in 25 years, according to the Food and Drug Administration. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that 139 people were sickened and 29 people have died, as of November 1.

Maybe we've come to expect such risks when dealing with meat products like raw hamburger, or even ground turkey (i.e. Cargill's recent 36 million pound recall), but the proportion of outbreaks caused by seemingly innocuous fruits and vegetables is increasing. This unfortunate trend points to serious production issues within the food industry, but also creates significant threats and challenges for staying safe in the home.

The basic rule of thumb for years has been to thoroughly cook meat and poultry to a recommended core temperature using a food thermometer, and specific guidelines have been established by the USDA that suggest safe minimal internal temperatures. On the microbiological level, this is proven to kill bacteria, rendering it harmless to people.

However, as dangerous pathogens like Listeria start finding their way onto fruits and vegetables, the protocol isn't as clear. Most people prefer to eat fruits and vegetables raw, and rarely do more than rinse them off with tap water before consuming. In the past this may have been adequate, but today consumers face new strains of bacteria, many of them resistant, and more hearty than ever before. As a result, consumers need to rethink how food is cleaned and prepared in their kitchens – and even be willing to break old habits and take extra time to keep their families safe.

Following are some tips to stay safe in the wake of so many dangerous food recalls.

Wash Fruits and Vegetables – Interestingly, there are plenty of toxic chemicals on the market that do an excellent job killing dangerous pathogens on a hard surface, but none of them can be sprayed directly on, or near food. Vigorously scrub the entire exterior of all fruits and vegetables (even the parts you don't plan to eat), under clean running water before cutting into them. Remember, fruits like the cantaloupe have a rough texture, making it difficult to clean and easy for bacteria to hide. Cutting into the fruit can spread this bacteria to a spot where it can be inadvertently consumed. .

Meticulously Disinfect and Sanitize Your Workspace – Remember to wash your hands, disinfect countertops, utensils and everything that comes in contact with food. This includes the sink, and even your kitchen floor, if something falls off the counter. Pets and children can then spread this bacteria throughout the house. To protect your family, always use a responsible disinfectant/sanitizer such as PURE Hard Surface, which is EPA registered for food contact surface sanitization and proven to kill dangerous pathogens like Listeria, Salmonella, E.coli, and others.

Isolate Produce – Keep fruits and vegetables isolated to avoid spreading bacteria. Keep all produce in plastic bags from the time of purchase until it is prepared. This includes preventing contact from shopping carts, which studies show carry dangerous bacteria. And, always wash your hands when you return from the supermarket, where you might have been exposed to any number of bacteria which could easily find its way to your countertop.

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