



Consumer Federation of America

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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**CDC: NO PROGRESS ON FOODBORNE ILLNESS  
IN LAST 5 YEARS<sup>1</sup>  
PEOPLE OVER 50 MOST LIKELY TO BE HOSPITALIZED OR DIE  
AS A RESULT OF FOODBORNE PATHOGENS**

The report on the incidence of foodborne illness in the United States during 2008, released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention today at noon, reveals two important points.

- For the fifth year in a row, government and industry have failed to make any real progress toward reducing illnesses caused by eight major foodborne pathogens. CDC's FoodNet disease tracking data for 2008 showed the rate of foodborne illnesses caused by *Campylobacter*, *Listeria*, *Salmonella*, *E. coli* O157:H7, *Vibrio*, *Shigella*, *Yersinia*, and *Cryptosporidium* has not declined significantly in the years 2006-08. The actual record is worse than the CDC press release indicates. CFA has reviewed FoodNet reports for each year since 2000 and found the incidence of illness caused by *Campylobacter* has not declined since 2002 and the incidence of *Salmonella* has remained the same since 2003. The *Salmonella* rate is twice as high as the national Health Objective for 2010. *Campylobacter* illnesses are usually associated with consumption of contaminated poultry.

- While the media and AARP want people over age 50 to think of themselves as "forever young," the new CDC data show that people over 50 are far more likely than any other age group to be hospitalized if they contract a foodborne illness caused by any of the eight major pathogens tracked and more likely to die from any of the illnesses except *E. coli* O157:H7, *Yersinia* and the parasite *Cryptosporidium*.

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<sup>1</sup> The current MMWR compares 2008 data to data from the years 2005-07 but the MMWR report for 2007 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Preliminary FoodNet Data on the Incidence of Infection with Pathogens Transmitted Commonly Through Food--10 States, 2007." *MMWR* 57(43): 366-370, April 11, 2008) note that declines in foodborne pathogens all occurred before 2004. The MMWR report for 2006 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Preliminary FoodNet Data on the Incidence of Infection with Pathogens Transmitted Commonly Through Food--10 States, 2006." *MMWR* 56(14): 336-339, April 13, 2007) noted that most of the decline in *Campylobacter* incidence occurred by 2001.

Young children under the age of four are the group most likely to contract a foodborne illness, but older Americans are the group most likely to suffer serious consequences that result in hospitalization or death.

“The CDC has opened the window and revealed that foodborne illness is a far more difficult problem to address than we had thought,” said Carol Tucker-Foreman, Distinguished Fellow at CFA’s Food Policy Institute. “Food poisoning is more than a bellyache. These are serious illnesses. For millions of children and older Americans foodborne illness means a trip to the hospital, and possibly death. Every American should insist that government and industry recognize the severity of the problem and act to protect us.. Each of us needs to take care to keep food at the right temperature and wash our hands but the fact remains that we can’t see or smell or taste foodborne pathogens. We can’t keep them out of our food. Government and industry have to live up to their roles in assuring our food is safe.”

“The CDC report provides the public health detail to a series of major foodborne illness outbreaks and massive recalls of contaminated food that have occurred over the past few years. Americans are getting sick, and dying, after eating common, ordinary foods that are staples on the family dinner table—spinach, onions, peanut products, ground beef. The CDC report should send a message to both the Obama Administration and the Congress that our food safety system has failed to protect us. Unless the President and the Congress act now to provide both the Food and Drug Administration and the Food Safety and Inspection Service the legal power and financial resources they need to keep pathogens out of our food, we can expect that more and more of our kids and older family members will suffer from these preventable diseases.”

### **For the Fourth Year Government Failed to Meet the 2005 National Health Objective for Reducing Listeria Related illnesses.**

Government public health agencies - CDC, FDA and FSIS - have consistently refused to acknowledge government has already failed to meet the National Health Objective for reducing illnesses associated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. This pathogen, which is responsible for the highest percentage of hospitalizations and deaths among the pathogens covered, is associated with ready-to-eat meat and poultry products and unpasteurized cheeses. If contracted by a pregnant woman, *Listeria* usually results in a miscarriage or stillbirth.

In May 2000 after the notorious BallPark Franks *Listeria* outbreak, President Clinton declared that *Listeria* needed special attention and set the goal of reducing the rate of illnesses to .25 per hundred thousand by 2005. The Bush Administration, in reporting the national health objective data usually failed to acknowledge the shortened time schedule and reported the date as 2010 as for all other illnesses. The Obama Administration has continued this habit. The CDC references the *Listeria* reduction goal as 2010.

The revelation that there has been no progress demonstrates how important the FoodNet data are. They force government agencies to try to explain why illnesses have not declined.

The FoodNet system began tracking illnesses in 1996 and has used the base years 1996-98 to measure progress. Between 1996 and 2001, a time when FDA adopted HACCP programs for seafood and fresh juice and the FSIS required all meat and poultry plants to implement HACCP programs, the rate of foodborne illness dropped substantially. Now the CDC has acknowledged that the early progress has not been sustained, though both FDA and FSIS officials, members of Congress and the food industry continue to claim victory based on reference to statistics that were biased by the small number of sites surveyed and are now past their prime.

With less than 24 months left, the nation is well short of meeting goals for improved health and disease reduction published in the government's primary health plan, *Healthy People 2010*. The incidence of Salmonella related illness is more than twice as high as the national goal. The rates of E. coli O157:H7 and Campylobacter are closer to the goal but have not moved or gone in the wrong direction for some time.

The 2008 data represent time under the old Administration. President Obama has said he said he will seek to improve food safety. Whether he will follow through with requests to Congress and encourage them to act remains to be seen.

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*Consumer Federation of America is a non-profit association of 300 consumer groups, representing more than 50 million Americans. It was established in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through research, education and advocacy. The Food Policy Institute at CFA works to promote a safer, healthier and more affordable food supply.*