



Consumer Federation of America

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CDC Data Show *Listeria* Food Poisoning Rate Increased in 2005

*US Failed to Meet Healthy People Goal of
Reducing *Listeria* Food Poisoning*

New FoodNet data for 2005, published today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, show that the incidence of *Listeria* food poisoning rose again in 2005. In addition, the United States government failed to meet its goal of reducing *Listeria monocytogenes* food poisoning to 2.5 cases per million by the end of 2005.¹

After substantial drops in the rate of *Listeria* food poisoning between 1996 and 2002, progress has not only stalled but cases of the disease are increasing. CDC compares the current rate of the disease to a baseline period of 1996-98 when foodborne illness was at a high point. The agency fails to note that progress has stopped. In 2005 the rate of 3 cases per million was the same as 2000. In 2003 the rate increased to 3.3 cases per million. The lowest number achieved was 2.7. CDC estimates there are 2,500 cases of *Listeria* food poisoning each year and 500 deaths.

The lack of progress in reducing *Listeria* food poisoning corresponds to USDA's failure to establish strong regulatory requirements to control contamination of deli meats and hot dogs. In 2003 the Bush Administration adopted interim final regulations that were far weaker than those proposed by USDA in early 2001. That proposal would have required meat companies under some circumstances to test finished meat products for the *Listeria* pathogen. As CFA detailed in its 2004 report, "Not Ready to Eat²," industry groups lobbied the USDA and the White House to drop the provision. The Bush Administration action was based on a risk assessment criticized by consumer groups because it did not even consider whether food poisoning would be reduced if plants were

¹ In May 2000, in response to a nationwide outbreak of *Listeria*, President Clinton announced that he was shortening the timetable for reaching the Healthy People goal of a 50% reduction in *Listeria* infections from the year 2010 to 2005. <http://www.foodsafety.gov/~dms/fs-wh20.html>

² http://www.consumerfed.org/pdfs/CFA_Not_Ready_to_Eat.PDF

required to take steps to control *Listeria* and, in addition, to test finished packages of meat if any *Listeria* organisms were found in the plant environment.

The failure to control *Listeria* food poisoning stands in contrast to the continued progress in reducing the rate of food poisoning from *E. coli* O157:H7. That progress began with the USDA declaring the pathogen to be an adulterant in raw meat. The meat industry immediately invested substantial amounts of energy and money to control the pathogen. In the case of *Listeria monocytogenes* the USDA delayed action and enacted weak regulations and there has been no progress.

Listeria infection in humans causes listeriosis, a disease with flu-like symptoms, including fever and gastrointestinal disorders. The infection may spread to the nervous system, resulting in serious headaches, stiff neck, loss of balance or convulsions. *Listeria* food poisoning is most frequently traced to deli meats, hot dogs, and other meat and poultry products that are labeled "cooked," and "ready-to-eat."

Unsuspecting consumers read the label and assume it is safe to consume the product without reheating. Pregnant women are especially vulnerable to listeriosis infection and a pregnant woman who contracts the disease will virtually always suffer a miscarriage or stillbirth. In addition, persons with weakened immune systems and the elderly are particularly susceptible to the disease.

In order to reduce the risk of *Listeria* for these vulnerable populations, USDA should require meat companies to add finished product testing to their controls and to label so-called ready to eat products with a statement that pregnant women and young children should be especially careful to reheat the product thoroughly since the products may be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

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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.