



Consumer Federation of America

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U.S. Progress on Foodborne Illness Stalled in 2006

*CDC says 2006 rate not appreciably better than 1996-98 baseline
for E. coli, Salmonella, Campylobacter*

FoodNet data released today by the Centers for Disease Control show that the progress against two major foodborne pathogens—*E. coli* O157:H7 and *Salmonella*—has stalled. After ten years the rates of illness from these pathogens remains close to the original baseline data from 1996-98. There were major reductions in the late 1990s but little progress since 2001. The bad news about foodborne illness coincides with Bush Administration policies that have given little time, attention or resources to combating food poisoning. The USDA is pursuing a program to reduce inspection in one-third of the nation's meat and poultry plants and acknowledges that over 200 plants have not had daily inspection as required by law. The Administration has reduced funding for the Food and Drug Administration's food safety efforts for years. CDC's data reflect the lack of commitment at the highest levels of government to reducing foodborne illness. Food poisoning claims 5,000 lives every year and causes 325,000 hospitalizations.

CDC also reported that illnesses associated with three major pathogens increased in 2006 over the preceding year. The rates for food poisoning from *E. coli* O157:H7, *Salmonella* and *Listeria* were higher in 2006 than in 2005. While the increase was not large, these increases are further evidence that the U.S. is no longer making substantial progress in efforts to control foodborne illness.

In fact, we are slowly losing the war. For the second year in a row the *Listeria* food poisoning rate increased. The rate in 2006 is slightly higher than it was in 2000. The U.S. government continues to compare illnesses from the most recent year to 1996-98, a time when there had been few government efforts to control food related disease. For a few years we made inroads reducing illness but the progress has ended. We're going backwards. The cause may well be because the FDA does not have sufficient financial or legal resources and the USDA continues to claim successes it cannot document. Neither agency is sending a strong message to the public or to the food industry that they have to clean up their act. The result is more illnesses and deaths.

The Listeriosis rate rose for the second straight year and the U.S. again failed to meet the National Health Objective of reducing the rate of illness from this pathogen to 2.5 by 2005. The CDC again failed to report accurately the 2005 goal, listing the date as 2010.

A Presidential order in May 2000 changed the *Listeria* reduction goal. U.S. government agencies, however, have refused to acknowledge the change and report it accurately.

Listeria is the most lethal of foodborne pathogens. While it causes few cases of illness each year, 20% of those stricken die. The estimated number of deaths is 499, second only to the total deaths from E. coli O157:H7, a more commonly occurring illness. Most of those made ill are pregnant women who virtually always suffer miscarriage or stillbirth as a result of the illness.

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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.