

ARTICLE

Why So Many Food Recalls?



In recent years, it seems that food recalls are becoming more and more frequent - and they are! According to a recent report by the non-partisan Public Interest Research Group (PIRG), food recalls, are indeed, increasing. The total number of food recalls in the U.S. increased by 10% between 2013 and 2018, hitting a peak of 905 in 2016. There has been an increase in meat and poultry recalls (66%) and to a much lesser extent, an increase in produce and processed foods recalls (2%). Of concern, there has been a shift in categories of recalls. Class I recalls, the most dangerous class of recalls wherein there is a reasonable probability that eating the food will cause health problems or death, increased 83% from 2013 to 2018.

These statistics certainly appear to be cause for alarm. However, in an interview with Time magazine, Matt Stasiewicz, an assistant professor of applied food safety at the University of Illinois states this may not be the case. Even though recalls are getting more common, Stasiewicz says that doesn't automatically mean more pathogens are ending up in the food supply, since "the vast majority" of recalls are precautionary and "not linked to any illness." (Ducharme, 2019). Indeed, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data suggests that rates of food-borne illness have remained relatively stable in recent years.

Role of Regulatory changes

Some experts feel that the increase in recalls, and the 2016 peak of recalls, may be rooted in more comprehensive or conservative enforcement or self-policing as precautionary. The Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) instituted a number of upgrades to both fronts of our modern food safety systems: preventative protections including health standards, inspections and enforcement to keep food-borne contaminants out of the food supply, and reactive protections provides for the removal of contaminated products from the distribution system after these products have arrived at the point of purchase. And though the law was passed in 2011, the deadline for full compliance by producers was in 2016, which may have contributed to the spike.

Better Surveillance Technologies

It's possible that food contamination incidents are not more frequent, but rather, the industry may now be better at detection and traceback of food contaminants, so more incidents are reported. Advancements in technology have enabled such detection. One such innovation of note is Whole Genome Sequencing which can reveal the complete DNA composition of an organism. This capability

Increase in meat and poultry recalls from 2013-2018

66%

Increase in produce and processed foods recalls from 2013-2018

2%

Overall increase in recalls between 2013-2018

10%

Risk of health problems or death from eating recalled food

83%

enables experts to link seemingly disparate diseases across broad geographies through matching genomes and linking them back to a single point of origination.

The USDA Economic Research Service agrees. Their "Trends in Food Recalls" report asserts that it is likely our detection and measurement, rather than an increase in contamination that are the root cause of increased recalls. "A more likely possibility is that pathogen and risk detection technology improvements, and (more common) external audits of the technologies" increased "the number of detected health risks in food products. Indeed, in recent years, rapid-detection methods have evolved to become more time efficient, sensitive, specific, and labor saving when compared with older, conventional methods."

An additional shift that has reaped traceback benefits are the growth of new payment methods and sales and delivery channels. Consumer conveniences including food delivery services via apps, loyalty cards, credit cards, stored value cards, and other data-rich mechanisms all support more effective investigations by regulators.

Clearly, it should be considered that new recalls identified through these mechanisms may be revealing issues not previously discovered, and may not reflect an actual increase in contamination incidents, but rather an increase in detection and measurement.

Trends in food production

Today's food systems are diverse and complex, involving everything from subsistence farming to multinational food companies. Food production is increasingly industrialized, globalized and interconnected. And the movement of food and food ingredients includes animals, plants, minerals, and vitamins and a multitude of intermediary products, both plant and animal based. Therefore, with more touchpoints in the complex network of our modern food delivery ecosystem, more opportunities for food contamination occur.

The growth of factory farms, and meat production facilities particularly are growing in size, which may be a contributing factor to food safety issues as well. As more animals pass through any one facility, the more chances there are for the spread of pathogens. The impact of a problem originating with a large-scale facility can be enormous. For example, in 2010, conditions at two Iowa egg companies caused a recall of more than half a billion potentially Salmonella-tainted eggs. On the other hand, some argue that the corporations running these large facilities have the resources and legal impetus to trigger a recall, but artisanal and local may not.

Another industry trend is the practice by US produce farms to house livestock or border animal farms, according to the PIRG report. Cross-contamination from animal manure and runoff can cause pathogens like E. coli to spread to fruits and vegetables, as was suspected to be the case with a significant romaine lettuce outbreak in Arizona. Some experts suspect this production style may be shifting the source of food-borne illness outbreaks toward leafy greens and other vegetables.

The shift to more prepared foods is another change that increases food safety risk. The food production industry transformed from a supply-focused to a demand-driven industry in the 20th century, and that pattern has shown no sign of slowing down, particularly in the United States. The prevalence of

a fast-paced lifestyle, especially in urban areas has resulted in strong demand for prepared foods and meals ready to eat. Market Research Future, which focuses on market reports associated with the Food, Beverages & Nutrition sector among others, expects demand for ready to eat meals to grow at a CAGR rate of 6% from the year 2016 to 2022. This approach to food delivery and product has many more touchpoints than a raw ingredient approach to food consumption, resulting in increased opportunity for contamination.

A Safe Food Supply is the Goal

Though there may be a multitude of reasons food recalls are on the rise - whether it's an improvement in our ability to identify issues or if the contamination problem is actually worsening, ultimately, the focus for the food industry and their suppliers, vendors and service providers, along with government regulators should be focused on delivering safe, uncontaminated food to consumers.

Sources

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