

A Cup of Health with CDC

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[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Matthew Reynolds] Welcome to A Cup of Health with CDC, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds

Last summer hundreds became sick and a few died after eating spinach contaminated by *E. coli* bacteria. Spinach was pulled from supermarket shelves across the country.

This outbreak is an example of a foodborne disease. These illnesses are caused by bacteria, viruses, or chemicals that contaminate our food.

Foodborne diseases are common in the United States. Each year contaminated foods make nearly 76 million people sick. About five thousand people die.

A group of researchers at CDC collects information about foodborne disease outbreaks. They have recently published a report on the outbreaks between 1998 and 2002. Here to discuss that report and foodborne diseases is Dr. Michael Lynch of CDC's National Center for Zoonotic, Vector-Borne, and Enteric Diseases

Welcome to the show Dr. Lynch

[Dr. Lynch] Thanks, Matt. It's great to be here.

[Matthew Reynolds] So tell us Dr. Lynch, how does CDC collect data about foodborne diseases [outbreaks]?

[Dr. Lynch] Well, foodborne diseases [outbreaks] are identified, investigated and controlled by local and state health departments, sometimes with assistance from CDC. The health departments then use a web-based system to report the findings of their investigations to us here at CDC. They tell us about what caused the outbreak, what food might have been involved, how many people were ill, and several other aspects of the outbreak.

[Matthew Reynolds] Why is it so important to collect this type of data?

[Dr. Lynch] Well, this information helps us understand the types of bacteria, viruses, parasites, and chemicals that can cause foodborne disease outbreaks, the foods associated with outbreaks, and other factors that might contribute to occurrence of the outbreaks.

[Matthew Reynolds] So, what are some of the trends you found in foodborne outbreaks?

[Dr. Lynch] We saw more outbreaks reported to CDC from 1998 to 2002 than in past years. We think that is because of efforts to facilitate reporting, not because there were more outbreaks occurring. We also saw that the cause of the outbreak was confirmed more often than in the past. More of those outbreaks were found to be due to viruses, namely a particular virus called norovirus. We had always suspected norovirus was the cause of many outbreaks; but now better viral diagnostic tools have allowed state and local investigators to confirm that.

[Matthew Reynolds] How often can you pinpoint the source of foodborne illnesses?

[Dr. Lynch] Well, foodborne illness can be caused by food contaminated at just about any point from the farm to our tables. Some bacteria are carried by food animals, or are present in the environment where produce items are grown, and they contaminate the food during processing. Sometimes food is contaminated during preparation in the kitchen.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Lynch, are there certain foods that are more likely to be the source of foodborne diseases?

[Dr. Lynch] We see a wide variety of foods associated with many different kinds of outbreaks. During this time period, there were outbreaks due to ground beef, poultry, pork, as well as several produce items. Salmonella outbreaks due to eggs were reported less often than in the past. We think this is related to efforts by food safety officials and industry to reduce contamination of eggs.

[Matthew Reynolds] Where do people usually consume the foods that make them sick?

[Dr. Lynch] The most commonly reported place where food was eaten in outbreaks was at restaurants. The second most common place was food eaten at home.

[Matthew Reynolds] Are there simple measures that we can take to protect ourselves at home and in restaurants?

[Dr. Lynch] You can protect yourself and your family from foodborne illness by washing your hands before handling food, thoroughly cooking meats, and avoiding contaminating foods, that won't be cooked, by raw meats in the kitchen.

[Matthew Reynolds] Thanks Dr. Lynch for taking the time to discuss an issue that I'm sure is important to many of our listeners.

[Dr. Lynch] Thanks, Matt.

[Matthew Reynolds] That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for A Cup of Health with CDC.

[Announcer] To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family, and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.