

Fish and shellfish cause most foodborne illness outbreaks

26-Nov-2008 - Fish and shellfish are more likely to cause foodborne-illness than any other category of food product, according to the US Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

The agency said that outbreaks involving fresh produce grabbed the headlines this year and last, but an analysis of the rates of outbreak-related illnesses caused by various foods shows that fish and shellfish account for more sicknesses per bite than any other category.

Outbreaks

The CSPI claims that its alert database, even when not adjusted for consumption, has more seafood outbreaks - 1,140 - than for any other category of food.

"Fin fish, such as tuna, grouper, mahi mahi, and salmon, were linked to 694 of those outbreaks; molluscs, including oysters, clams, and mussels were linked to 175 outbreaks; and the rest linked to shrimp, lobster, or foods such as crab cakes and tuna burgers.

"While Vibrio bacteria and noroviruses contributed to those, naturally occurring toxins such as scombrototoxin and ciguatera account for a plurality of seafood outbreaks," stated the agency.

It said that, according to its data, a pound of fish and shellfish is 29 times more likely to cause illness than the safest food category, a pound of dairy foods.

Prevention urged

The CSPI said that as foodborne illness is dramatically underreported, and due to the fact that it is so difficult to prove which food caused an outbreak, its data represents just the tip of a very large iceberg: *"Each year, according to the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), foodborne illness sickens 76 million and kills 5,000 Americans."*

The not for profit consumer group is urging the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to reduce its reliance on recalls and warnings and instead focus on preventing these problems ever reaching consumers.

UK findings

Meanwhile, a survey from the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) showed low levels of *Listeria* in smoked fish in retail outlets.

The food safety regulator said that more than 3,000 samples of ready-to-eat hot and cold smoked fish were analysed to check for *Listeria monocytogenes*, the main type of *Listeria* that causes illness in humans, between July and November 2006 from over 1,000 retail outlets in the UK.

While traces of *Listeria monocytogenes* were found in 302 samples, 99 per cent were within the legal limit for ready-to-eat foods, according to FSA.

In addition, the agency stated that no salmonella was detected in any of the samples tested but that it found variations in storage temperatures at retail ranging from -14°C to 13.3°C.

Safety controls

The UK Salmon Processors and Smokers Group (SPSG) said that FSA's findings come as no surprise to its members.

"Food safety is our sector's number one priority and members of SPSG have been working hard over many years to ensure the right production controls are in place," claims the association.

The SPSG told FoodProductionDaily.com that its members implement rigorous hygiene, safe handling and storage methods to help prevent the growth of any low levels of *Listeria* which might naturally be present:

"They monitor the raw material, process and product for Listeria and take appropriate preventative actions to minimise the risk of it occurring in smoked fish. Companies regularly review their production operations and follow industry best practice, which is fully communicated across the sector."

Food puzzle

Dr Andrew Wadge, chief scientist at the FSA said: *'Although only a snapshot of one type of food, this survey adds another piece to the listeria puzzle. We know cases are on the increase in the over-60s, but we don't know why.*

"These findings suggest that, listeria isn't generally a problem in ready-to-eat smoked fish at point of sale – but it doesn't tell us what happens when people get it home.

"Are they preparing and storing food correctly and eating it within its 'use by' date? These and other questions are at the heart of further work we're doing with our expert scientific committees to get to the bottom of this increase in listeria.'