



Jama Unnecessarily Scares Consumers With 'Old News'

Incidence of Salmonellosis from Alfalfa Sprouts is Minuscule in Comparison to Other Foods

by Steve Meyerowitz

In its January 10th 1999 issue, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) described two incidences of Salmonella contamination from alfalfa sprouts that took place in 1995. Many regulations and industry corrections have taken place since then which have made sprouts safe. While it is true that alfalfa sprouts pose a risk because they are not sterilized by cooking, historically, the numbers of incidents and numbers of people affected by sprout borne salmonellosis run far below the risk of common foods such as meat, poultry, milk and eggs.

In its 40 year history, only twelve incidents of bacterial infection in sprouts have been recorded, and nine of them came from the same seed source. The contaminated seed was imported from the Netherlands. All alfalfa seeds since then have been subject to strict scrutiny and purification by both importers and growers. The sprout industry today is in full compliance with the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). The FDA has since reclassified sprouters from 'farmers' to 'food processors.' This designation demands strict regulation of growers for eliminating potentially infectious conditions throughout sprout growing and packaging. Currently, growers use a chlorination process, similar to how the nation's water supplies are treated. It is approved by the CDC for its safety and effectiveness. Growers are also researching alternative processes that could achieve even better purification.

Sprout contamination, however, makes sensational news because:

a) Prior to 1995, the tiny sprout industry was unknown to the CDC and USDA. Its discovery attracted attention.

b) The USDA and CDC took a greater interest in sprouts, because the growing conditions for seeds are also favorable growing conditions for bacteria and because as a raw food, sprouts do not benefit from sterilization by cooking. Common garden vegetable seeds are also subject to these same risks.

c) Sprouts are also newsworthy because it is a legendary health food. It is an irony for a health food to be the cause of ill health.

Unlike other industries, such as meat, poultry, and tobacco, the tiny \$250 million dollar sprout industry has no public relations firm or Washington lobbyists to defend itself. The industry is woefully ineffective in telling its side of the story.

Balancing The Risks to Public Health

Any infectious outbreak is scary news. But in order to avoid a panic that propels a problem out of proportion, we must understand its risks compared with other risks.

According to the USDA, salmonella contamination from foods such as poultry, meat, eggs and fresh produce sickens 4 million people annually in the U.S. Only 700 people reported salmonellosis in the two 1995 sprout incidents described in the JAMA article. But the article estimates that up to 20,000 people were probably affected.

According to the FDA, 93% of all bacterial illnesses from human and animal pathogens come from meat, poultry and dairy. While fatalities are rare, in 1995, the same year as the reported sprout cases, the CDC documented 15 fatalities caused by reactions to foods such as peanuts, milk, eggs and shellfish. Every year, there are an estimated 9,000 deaths and 81 million illnesses due to unsafe foods. (Wall Street Journal 8/21/98) There have never been any fatalities from sprouts.

In 1997, Cox Newspapers analyzed a USDA computerized database of meat and poultry inspection records for 1996 and found 138,593 instances in which inspectors said food being prepared in packing plants was "certain" to sicken consumers. The database was obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

The risks of contracting salmonellosis from alfalfa sprouts is small and probably akin to the proverbial analogy "getting hit by a car crossing the street." But there are greater and more troubling infection risks threatening consumers today that are not even food related. According to William Jarvis of the CDC, each year about 2 million people acquire infections while under care in U.S. hospitals and nearly 90,000 die of them. (Based on a 1998 survey of 265 U.S. hospitals)

Why Eat Sprouts

Sprouts are a nutritionally concentrated, pesticide-free, locally grown, fresh produce available year round. The National Cancer institute and the National Institutes of Health recommend Americans eat 5 vegetable meals each day. With the increasing cost of fresh produce, the diminishing acreage of farmland, and the greater dependence on imported produce, sprouted foods from local farmers have become a viable alternative source of nutritious, affordable mini-vegetables. The anti-cancer benefits of sprouts were well documented by researchers at Johns Hopkins University in August of 1997. 'Kitchen gardening' is also a fun, nutritious way for consumers to garden year round making families more self-sufficient and saving on the grocery bill.

While the U.S. food and water supply will never be completely free of harmful bacteria, eating alfalfa sprouts is healthier and statistically safer than eating meat, dairy, eggs or poultry. Despite the numbers, most Americans can have confidence that their food supply is safe. To that end, sprout growers continue to comply with CDC and USDA regulations to ensure the production of safe, healthy, and delicious sprouts.

Also available: *How to Develop an 'Inner Defense' to Protect against Contaminated Food and Water* . Steve Meyerowitz is the author of *Sprouts the Miracle Food* and other books on diet and health. He is not a commercial sprout grower. January 15, 1999

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The foregoing article is provided by The Sprout House®, a leading supplier of organic sprouting seeds and growing kits designed by Sproutman® Steve Meyerowitz, as a service for informational purposes. No medical advice is intended or should be inferred.

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