

# How Safe Is Your Food?

Gemma Alexander February 1, 2019

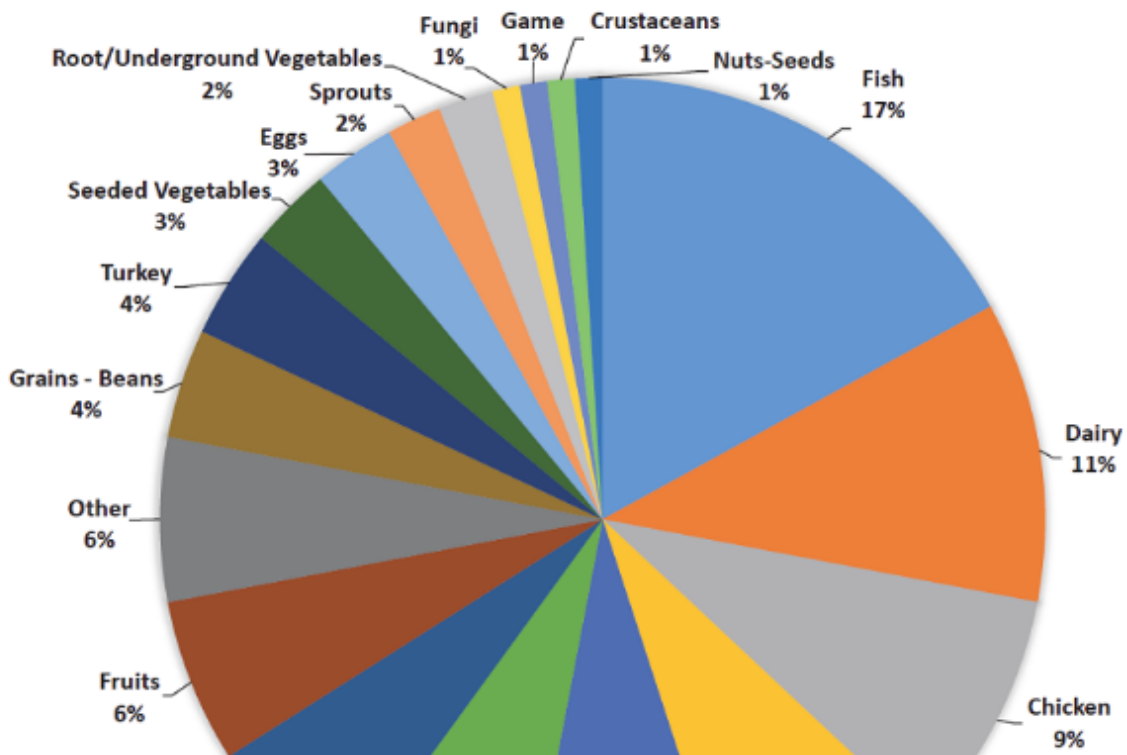


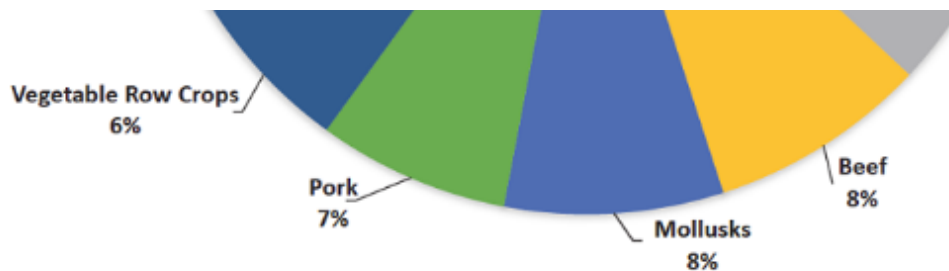
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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in six Americans (roughly 48 million people) are infected by foodborne illness every year. About 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 of them die. Preventing foodborne illness in the United States is the responsibility of two federal agencies, the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

## Risk on the Rise

The number of known foodborne illness outbreaks has increased with the ability to detect them. But the risks are growing, too. People are eating more fresh and raw foods that have traveled greater distances with more handling before reaching their plates. Rising ocean temperatures could lead to an increased presence of bacteria in seafood, 95 percent of which is imported in the U.S. We import about 50 percent of the fresh fruit and about 25 percent of the vegetables we eat in the U.S., too.





Source: CDC National Outbreak Reporting System, 2009-2016

THE GRAPH SHOWS FOOD TYPES THAT SICKENED PEOPLE IN OUTBREAKS WITH A SINGLE KNOWN SOURCE, DURING THE YEARS 2009-2016. IMAGE: CDC.GOV

## Changing Rules

Before the 1906 Food and Drug Act, the United States had no food regulations. It was perfectly legal to “preserve” milk with formaldehyde. (For a fascinating look at the origin of the food safety movement, read *The Poison Squad: One Chemist’s Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the 20th Century*.)

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, food safety standards and practices have improved. Most recently, the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) passed in 2011 and is still being implemented. The FSMA gives the FDA a legislative mandate to require comprehensive, science-based preventive controls across the food supply.

FSMA provides the FDA with new tools for inspection, compliance, and outbreak response — such as authority to issue mandatory recalls of tainted foods. And it gives FDA unprecedented authority to ensure that imported products meet U.S. standards.

But not all regulatory changes increase safety. A proposed rule that would shift some hog slaughterhouse responsibilities from the FDA’s Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) to the companies themselves is presented as a “modernization,” but at least 60 members of Congress are concerned that it will increase the risk of foodborne disease.

## Home Food Safety

Foodborne illnesses contracted at home make up only 8 percent of reported cases. While that low number may be partly done to lower reporting rates, it’s also good news. Eating at home is not only greener than eating out — it can be safer. At home, follow the four steps to food safety:

1. Wash hands and surfaces often.
2. Don’t cross-contaminate.
3. Cook to the right temperature.
4. Refrigerate promptly.

The FDA issues more than 100 food recalls each quarter. Current recalls and public health alerts are listed online, where you can sign up to receive email alerts when new ones are issued. If you discover that you have purchased a recalled food (or fear that you have already consumed one), follow the instructions on the food safety website.

## Safety Shutdown

For the first month of the U.S. government shutdown, most routine food-safety inspections were halted. Essential staff was working without pay to continue active investigations of foodborne illness outbreaks, dangerous recalls, and to inspect imported foods. Before the shutdown ended, additional food-safety inspectors were being called back to work (without pay) to resume routine inspections of high-risk food facilities, such as those that handle seafood and soft cheeses. Future shutdowns could make the U.S. food supply less safe.

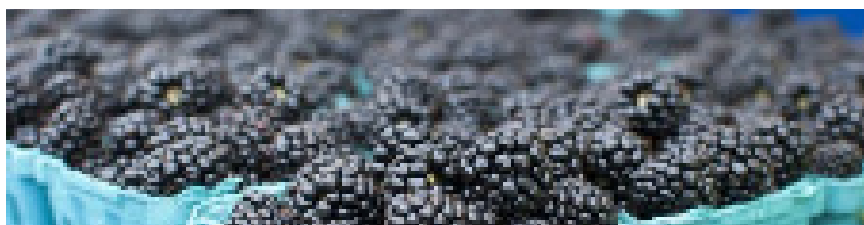
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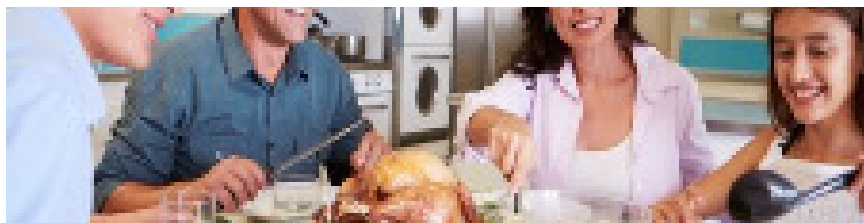


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### Gemma Alexander

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).