

Perspectives

Food Safety

Has publicity about E-coli 0157:H7 and spinach alarmed you? There were only 183 illnesses, 95 hospitalizations, and one death traced to spinach during the 2006 scare yet authorities were judicious in recalling spinach from suspected sources. Does this mean all spinach is unsafe and should not be eaten for now and evermore? Have you drawn inaccurate long term conclusions due to the media scare? Scare, not because these things aren't serious, but because they lack perspective and lead to unproductive behaviors.

Food borne illness is a serious problem and causes a great deal of suffering. However, the problem we're seeing in the media and the 'scaring' is one of perspective. So let's put things in perspective. According to data from the USDA and Centers for Disease Control – in the United States 200,000 people become sick from food borne illnesses, with 900 hospitalized and 14 deaths - every day! (United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service, Science and Technology, Microbiology Division, April 1996).

So why is the recent hysteria about spinach and the media's failure to present this issue in its proper and fair perspective a problem? First, it has caused damage to the spinach industry far beyond what is merited. And in reality, it actually leads us to do just the opposite of what we should do. It scares us into avoiding the types of raw foods that are the most helpful in the building of our immune system - which is our best defense against food borne illnesses. If you have a weak immune system, it does make sense to avoid this particular spinach from this particular area in central California for a short time until the problem is corrected – but any long term, or other avoidance of spinach or other raw foods would be counterproductive. (The "FDA has determined that the spinach implicated in the outbreak was grown in three California counties: the public can be confident that spinach grown in the non-implicated areas can be consumed." FDA News, P06-146, September 26, 2006)

Most of us have had food poisoning, probably several times in our lives, without even knowing it (according to USDA and CDC information referenced above, 1 in 4 of us will contract it each year). In most cases it just results in a little diarrhea or mild flu like symptoms. It is generally only in cases of a weakened immune system that more serious effects are experienced. When you think about it, during that spinach scare, there were probably hundreds of thousands who consumed 'contaminated' spinach without ever getting sick.

We also see the same thing with contaminated dairy. Ninety-five percent of dairy farmers drink their own milk raw – and rarely does anyone from the farm family get sick. On the other hand, if a school group, or scout troop, etc visit the farm and drink the raw milk intended for pasteurization, a small percentage of the group might become ill.

“According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 300 people in the United States became ill by drinking raw milk or eating cheese made from raw milk in 2001, and nearly 200 became ill from these products in 2002.” (FDA News letter P05-103, December 16, 2005)

Accordingly, raw milk illnesses, which in most cases likely involved milk that was intended for pasteurization, only account for 1 out of every 250,000 cases of food borne illnesses each year. If you don't even drink raw milk you have a 1 in 4 chance of getting food poisoning this year. It is estimated that there are about one million raw milk drinkers in the US – many of these are dairy farmers who drink their own milk. With 300 cases of food poisoning coming from raw milk, this means a raw milk drinker has a 1 in 3,333 chance of getting a milk borne illness. Furthermore, the vast majority of these cases occur with raw milk that is intended for pasteurization – produced at a much lower standard than raw milk coming from licensed raw milk dairies. (However, milk samples from commercial dairies often do show a high rate of pathogen contamination. And milk from these sources, which is not intended for raw consumption, often does cause illness in people who are not accustomed to it, and should be avoided. On the other hand, raw milk from dairies where cows are on grass and the milk is produced at a standard intended for raw consumption rarely test positive for illness causing pathogen – some have operated several years without any pathogen tests showing positive.)

The Center for Disease control is correct when it says that it is impossible to eliminate all food borne illness – it can only be minimized. However, the solution to avoiding food borne illness is not more antibiotics, avoiding the raw immune building foods, or cooking all the life out of everything. But rather by (1) strengthening your immune system by eating properly – including plenty of raw foods, raw milk, and foods rich in Probiotics such as kefir, kim-chi, Kombucha and supplements such as Primal Defense and EM. And (2) by knowing your food sources and minimizing your exposure. Most harmful bacteria originate in the gut of unhealthy animals – animals that are not in a proper free range pasture habitat and on their natural diet. As a consumer you can minimize your exposure by choosing animal products that don't come from confinement operations – but rather, from animals that are free roaming in clean pastures – particularly dairy, beef, pork, eggs, and poultry, and also choosing wild caught fish and wild game.

Remember, only living food brings life!

A study in the March 28th, 2000 issue of the Proceedings of the *National Academy of Sciences* reports that as many as one out of every three cattle may play host to the deadliest strain of *E. coli* bacteria (O157:H) This is ten times higher than earlier estimates. (Nearly all, if not all of the cattle contemplated in this study are grain fed. See www.eatwild.com for further information).

As explained in more detail in *Why Grassfed Is Best!* (Jo Robinson, Vashon Island Press, 2000), feeding cattle their natural diet of grass instead of grain greatly reduces the risk of disease transmission. Why? First, it keeps the overall bacteria count low. Second, it prevents the bacteria from becoming acid resistant. Acid-resistant bacteria are far more likely to survive the acidity of our normal digestive juices and cause disease. The first graph below illustrates the absolute numbers of *E. coli* bacteria found in grassfed versus grainfed animals. The second graph shows how many of the bacteria are likely to withstand our gastric juices. (Note: Grassfed animals have so few acid-resistant bacteria that the number fails to register on the scale of the graph.)

One of the lead researchers on the project, USDA microbiologist James Russell, told a reporter for *Science Magazine*, "We were absolutely shocked by the difference. We never found an animal that didn't agree with the trend."

Diez-Gonzalez, F., *et al.* (1998). "Grain-feeding and the dissemination of acid-resistant *Escherichia coli* from Cattle." *Science* 281, 1666-8.

