

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Stay safe by signing up for food recall alerts

My wife was recently diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, and so we are both watching what we eat much more carefully. I was surprised to learn that she needs to be more careful about foodborne illness now. We think we do pretty good at following guidelines at home, but how can we find out about food recalls?

Good for you for being aware that you need to be, well, more aware.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1 in 6 of us will suffer from foodborne illness every year, at-risk groups of people are more likely to get sick from contaminated food, and the illnesses can be much more severe. People with diabetes are 25 to 30 times more likely to get sick with listeriosis, for example, than a healthy adult.

Anyone with a chronic health condition, such as diabetes or even cancer, HIV/AIDS or lupus, is more at risk. Other at-risk individuals include pregnant women, adults who are over age 65, and children who are younger than 5.

And you're right, if you're relying on mass media or word of mouth, it can be hard to keep up with all the food recalls these days. In 2015, the U.S. Food Safety and Inspection Service issued 150 recall notices, and that agency covers just meat and animal products. There's no single government agency to track all food recalls, but early this year, Food Safety Magazine (foodsafetymagazine.com) did a compilation itself, counting a total of 626 food recalls for 2015 from the FSIS and the Food and Drug Administration, the two agencies responsible for food safety in the U.S., as well as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.



image: iStock

As in most years, many of the recalls in 2015 were related to food packages not being properly labeled for food allergens, such as milk and dairy, peanuts, eggs, wheat, and soy. While that could be a serious problem for the estimated 15 million Americans who suffer from food allergens, it wouldn't be an issue for you if no one in your household has a problem with those ingredients.

Still, a number of major recalls were due to the presence of human pathogens. Fortunately, there's an easy way to get notified by email whenever a recall is issued.

Just go to foodsafety.gov, and click on Recalls and Alerts. Choose "Get Automatic Alerts" and fill in your email address. That way you'll be notified of any recalls that have been issued.

You also can view recent recalls on the website. For example, last month there was an expansion of an earlier recall of frozen fruits and vegetables produced by CRF Frozen Foods and marketed under dozens of brand names. The food items have been associated with a multistate outbreak of *Listeria monocytogenes* infections, which can be serious, and even fatal, for at-risk populations. Even if you sign up for email alerts today, you would miss that notice if you didn't check the "See Recent Recalls" listing. When it comes to food safety, it's always better to be safe than sorry.

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Editor: This column was reviewed by Sanja Ilic, specialist in Food Safety with Ohio State University Extension.

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