Abstract

Escherichia coli 0157:H7 (*E. coli* 0157:H7) causes an estimated 73,000 foodborne illnesses and 2,100 hospitalizations per year (CDC). The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) maintains a foodborne illness outbreak database, categorized by food vehicle. CSPI's database was compiled from sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), state and local health departments, and medical and scientific journals. The database is updated regularly, and contains only outbreaks with known or suspected etiology and food vehicles. While the majority of *E. coli* 0157:H7 outbreaks are linked to undercooked beef, we identified the most common non-beef foods linked to *E. coli* 0157:H7 outbreaks. Between 1998 and 2002, there were 130 *E. coli* 0157:H7 outbreaks, involving 3,548 cases. Forty percent (n = 55) of these were linked to non-beef products. The most common non-beef food sources were produce items (n = 19) including romaine and iceberg lettuce, other salads, grapes, pears and fruit salad. Produce outbreaks constituted thirty-five percent of the non-beef *E. coli* 0157:H7 outbreaks, and twenty-eight percent of the cases. As the principal reservoir for *E. coli* 0157:H7 is cattle, produce outbreaks are likely due to cross-contamination by beef or cattle by-products (such as manure) somewhere in the food production chain. However, unlike beef, produce is often not subject to cooking or another final kill step prior to consumption. While cooking improvements might reduce the outbreaks linked to ground beef, they have effect on those caused by cross-contamination, either on the farm or in food production.