

Title A USDA perspective on the *Listeria* problem
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Abstract

Listeria monocytogenes, a harmful bacterium that can be found in a variety of foods, causes an estimated 2,500 illnesses and 500 deaths in the United States each year. A substantial portion of the illnesses and deaths are associated with meat and poultry products. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the public health agency at the United States Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) that establishes food safety standards for meat, poultry, and processed egg products, used the outputs of the following 2 types of risk-determining documents to establish new regulatory requirements for this pathogen: The relative risk ranking of select foods at retail coordinated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and FSIS, and the in-plant risk assessment designed by FSIS to assess various mitigation strategies. The regulations were designed to provide an incentive for the meat and poultry industry to lower the risk of *Listeria monocytogenes* in ready-to-eat product by using post-lethality treatments and antimicrobial agents rather than relying upon sanitation alone to control this food safety hazard. Since October 2003, FSIS has been assessing the effectiveness of these new regulations and has begun to use risk-based verification testing strategies in order to further ensure that meat and poultry products are not adulterated with this pathogen. One complication in reducing the illnesses and deaths caused by *Listeria monocytogenes* in meat and poultry products is that many of the products produced in FSIS regulated facilities are contaminated at retail. FSIS now is assessing how it can impact a change in the retail sector regarding the presence of this pathogen, because FSIS estimates that greater than 50% of ready-to-eat meat and poultry products are sliced or further handled at retail.