

Retail Food Safety Program

January 2010

A Core Public Health Issue

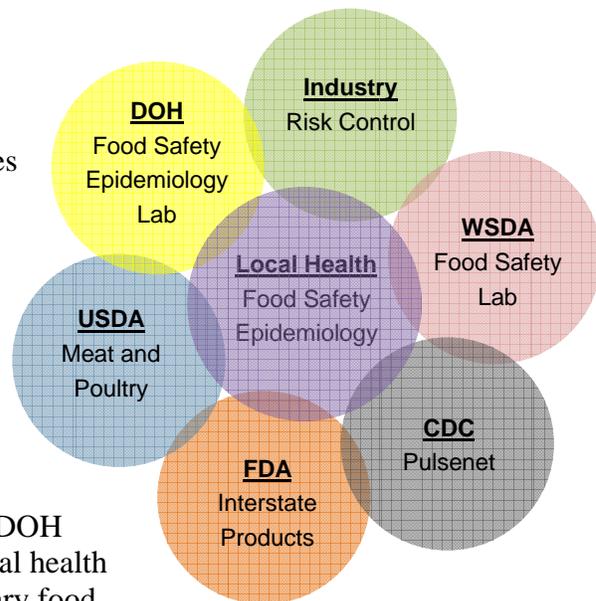
Foodborne illness prevention is a core public health issue. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that over 76 million Americans are affected by foodborne illness annually, including 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 related deaths. In Washington, one in four people are affected each year and dozens die from complications. All foodborne disease is preventable!

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) works closely with all 35 local health jurisdictions, the state Department of Agriculture, other state departments, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the foodservice industry and others to coordinate *prevention*, *surveillance* and *response* activities to enhance the safety of our food service system and to limit the impact of foodborne illness in our state.

Prevention

Preventing foodborne illnesses requires the joint efforts of all regulatory and industry partners. Illnesses are prevented by: keeping food free of contamination as it is grown, processed, prepared and served; maintaining proper temperature controls to limit bacterial growth; and cooking or otherwise treating the food to kill harmful pathogens.

A well-educated public, industry and regulatory team is an important part of prevention of foodborne illness. At all levels, education has been increasing, particularly on web sites and other electronic media. DOH provides training and daily technical assistance to local health jurisdiction staff and industry partners on contemporary food safety issues. For the past 50 years, food workers in Washington have been trained and tested on basic food safety in order to receive a Food Worker Card. In 2008, over 264,000 Food Worker Cards were issued by local health jurisdictions.



Surveillance

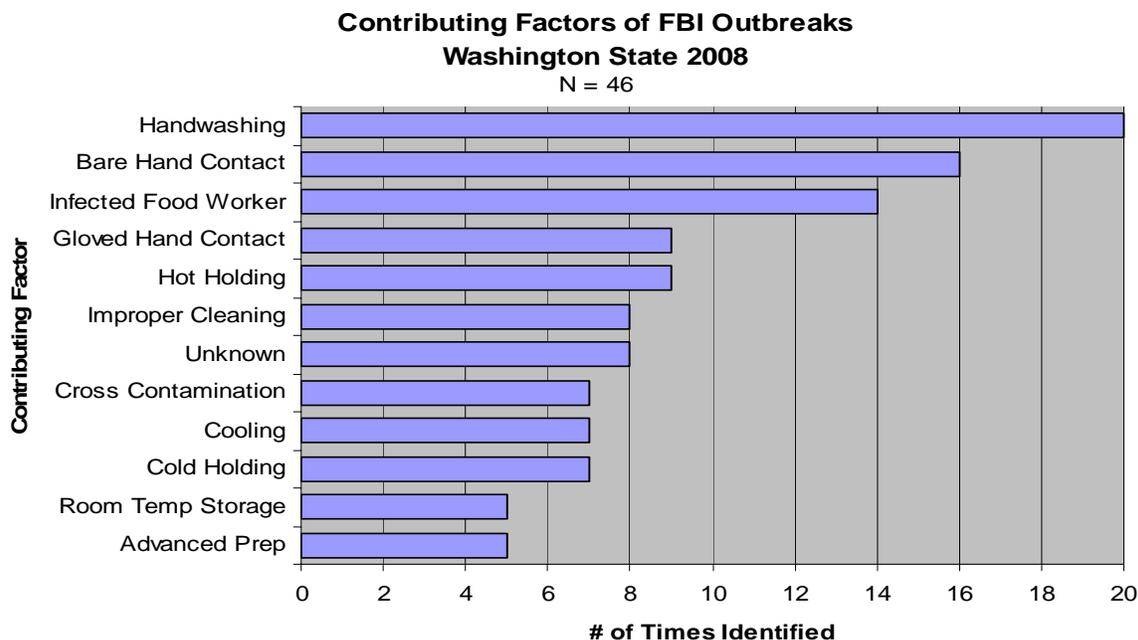
A science-based food safety rule, based on national food safety standards, is enforced at both state and local levels, and is updated as needed. Inspections occur in most facilities at least twice a year. Each inspection is an enforcement and educational opportunity, to encourage staff to maximize food safety actions on a daily basis.

Most of the retail food service operations in the state are inspected by local health jurisdictions. In 2008, they completed over 47,000 inspections at over 34,000 food establishments. In addition, various state agencies license and inspect a variety of institutional food service operations, including hospitals, nursing homes and day care centers.

Response

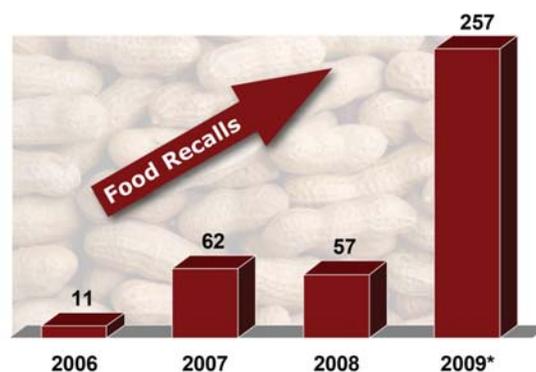
Washington State has a very active foodborne illness response system. Foodborne illness outbreaks are investigated for three reasons: to stop the outbreak in its tracks; to determine the cause; and to apply

lessons learned in the investigations to focus future training and to make policy changes. In the past ten years, an average of 58 outbreaks each year have been reported and investigated. Outbreak response starts at the local level and is supported by DOH and federal agencies, as needed. Local health jurisdictions also collect thousands of individual communicable disease reports and interview cases, as appropriate. Seventy-five percent (75%) of reported outbreaks are associated with restaurant meals. The #1 contributing factor in outbreaks is poor hand washing practices (see chart).



Washington State uses this data to make policy changes and to focus training. Statewide food safety activities are focused on the most common causes of foodborne illness.

A major factor in today’s response system is *PulseNet* – a national electronic laboratory information-sharing system that rapidly identifies matches of disease-causing pathogens from all across the country. Many of the large regional and national foodborne illness outbreaks over the past 10 years were discovered via this state-of-the-art combination of technology and communications. The DOH public health laboratory has always been an active *PulseNet* participant.



Since 2007, the number of national food product recalls has increased dramatically. In 2009, over 260 food product recalls have been announced that impacted products in Washington State. In comparison, there were only 11 such food recalls in all of 2006. DOH coordinates the statewide response to food product recalls, communicating information to all the various public and private sector stakeholders. One example is the large-scale peanut recall in early 2009 in which there were hundreds of individual products recalled due to potential Salmonella contamination. Actions by state and local health staff prevented untold numbers of illnesses.

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