



Home Food Safety™

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Healthful Eating and Food Safety: What's the Connection?

by Jackie Newgent, registered dietitian nutritionist

There is no one-size-fits-all diet that defines healthful eating. It may involve meat or no meat. It may follow a traditional MyPlate guide or a Mediterranean-style approach. It may contain gluten or no gluten. No matter what the healthy plan entails, when advised by a registered dietitian nutritionist, it will be nutrient-rich while offering a variety of foods to promote good health and prevent disease.

RDNs often use *The Dietary Guidelines for Americans* as a general reference. These *Guidelines* emphasize fruits, vegetables, whole grains and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products and limit saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, sodium and added sugars.

Eating more healthfully involves much more than just food categories or nutrients. RDNs promote what to eat as well as how to properly handle the food that's eaten. To make sure food helps maintain or improve health, it must also be safe. Handling food properly—from purchase to plate—can help maintain the nutrients within food to promote good health, as well as keep harmful bacteria away to prevent food poisoning.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that about 1 in 6 Americans (that's 48 million people!) gets sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases each year. The causes of food poisoning vary from year to year as the environment changes. For example, the number of cases from 2006 to 2013 involving *E. coli* 0157, *Salmonella*, *Listeria* and *Yersinia* remained relatively consistent. However, illness caused by *Campylobacter* has increased by 13 percent and *Vibrio vulnificus* by a whopping 75 percent. Luckily, there are some signs of improvement, such as a slight decrease in *Salmonella* infections over the past three years (2010 to 2013).

Whether working in community, clinical, government, foodservice, food industry or media settings, RDNs play a critical role in helping consumers understand what these bacteria are; where they're found; who is most at risk for food poisoning; and how to safely buy, store and prepare all food to prevent bacterial infection. For instance, when educating about the selection of fish and shellfish for heart health, RDNs can also inform consumers that *Vibrio* foodborne infection can be prevented by cooking oysters or not eating them during warmer months. If working with the elderly or sick individuals, food and nutrition professionals can counsel them regarding their increased risk for bacterial infection. When providing recommendations on healthful cooking, RDNs can encourage individuals to wash hands more

often when handling or preparing food.

Most foodborne illnesses are preventable! That means the hospitalizations and deaths related to these illnesses are mostly preventable, too. Reducing food poisoning by just 1 percent would prevent approximately 500,000 Americans from getting sick each year; reducing it by 10 percent would prevent about 5 million individuals from getting sick. In fact, the simple activity of proper handwashing alone could wipe out a significant amount of food poisoning in this country.

So with 1 in 6 Americans getting sick and 3,000 dying every year from food poisoning, why don't these numbers translate into more personal concern and action by the public? For one, there's the "it won't happen to me" mentality to consider. Beyond that, these numbers are not reaching everyone in an impactful way. For instance, food poisoning outbreaks that get most of the media attention are often associated with restaurants or grocery stores and not home cooking. But there's actually a greater incidence of food poisoning from home-prepared food than from food prepared away from home, but these cases often go unreported.

Useful information about food safety needs to reach consumers on an ongoing basis. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics continues to provide the public with accurate, meaningful, user-friendly and actionable food safety information through the Home Food Safety program and homefoodsafety.org. Additionally, according to the Academy, food and nutrition professionals need to play a major role in [food and water safety education and research](#). They should team with food and agriculture industries and members of the medical community, in educational, research, and policy agenda settings, to address these issues as they relate to the public and industry. It's not solely a consumer issue.



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