

# Globalization exposes food supply to unsanitary practices

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As the United States continues to import increasingly more of its food from developing nations, we are putting ourselves at greater risk of foodborne disease because many of these countries do not have the same sanitary standards for production, especially in the case of seafood and fresh produce, say scientists today at the 108th General Meeting of the American Society for Microbiology in Boston.

“Approximately 15 percent of food consumed in the United States in 2006 was imported. Sanitation practices for food production are not universally equivalent throughout the world. Importing foods can move diseases from areas where they are indigenous to locations where they are seldom or do not exist,” says Michael Doyle of the University of Georgia.

The year 2004 was the first year on record the United States imported more food than it exported. Approximately 15% of food consumed in the United States in 2006 was imported, with the most common being fresh produce, tree nuts and fish and shellfish. And the trend is that number will continue to increase, says Doyle.

“The reality is we are going to continue to import foods at a greater rate in large part because labor costs in developing countries are much lower than they are here. We are going to see more food coming from developing countries which frequently have lower standards for producing foods,” says Doyle.

Already over 80% of fish and seafood consumed in the United States is imported, and much of that comes from Asia. Raw domestic sewage and/or livestock manure are frequently used in fish farming in many Asian countries. In Thailand chicken coops (as many as 20,000 birds per farm) sit in rows suspended over ponds that hold shrimp and fish that feed on the waste that falls from above.

In China, crops and seafood are typically grown on small parcels where individual farmers try to produce as much food from their parcels as they can. To do that they often use excessive amounts of pesticides for produce and antibiotics for fish and shrimp production. Many of these compounds are not approved for use in the United States. Untreated human waste and animal manure are often used to treat soils or aquaculture ponds.

Not surprisingly, contaminants found in imported foods are those primarily associated with fecal matter. Over one quarter of all contaminated seafood imports detained by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2001 were contaminated with Salmonella bacteria. More than half of those violations were shrimp.

Doyle warns that consumers should not immediately jump the gun and start avoiding foods from particular countries. Many U.S. companies import food and produce from these countries only if they can verify that the food was produced under stringent sanitary conditions.

“Just because it comes from a particular country does not necessarily mean it is bad,” says Doyle.

Part of the problem is there is just so much coming into the country that the government cannot inspect it all. The FDA physically inspects less than one percent of more than 9 million imported entries annually. But the onus should not be entirely on the government says Doyle.

“It is incumbent on food processors to ensure ingredients or products they import are produced under good sanitary practices. It is the industry that is responsible for producing safe foods. It is the government’s responsibility to verify that they are producing safe foods,” says Doyle.

Source: American Society for Microbiology

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