

Should we be afraid to eat?

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Eating is now perceived to be a dangerous business. As more and more news about food scares hit the headlines, we feel that the list of foods that could make us sick gets longer. Public health statistics show a rise in foodborne diseases caused by microorganisms. We are also told that these diseases are under-reported.

Should we be afraid to eat? In Europe, food is plentiful and of good quality. Thanks to science, technology and strict regulation, it is mostly safe. Why are we so worried? One reason is that food issues are important to us and stories of foodborne illness provoke an emotional response -- everyone has to eat. Governments, science and industry are often criticised in their failure to address consumers' fears rapidly and convincingly. The media, on the other hand, may stretch facts to make a catchy story.

Another reason for public anxiety is that improved communications allow news, especially bad news, to travel widely and quickly. Thanks to the media attention to foodborne disease, consumers are becoming aware of microbiological risks in food. This leads to increased reporting. 'Stomach upsets' that once would have gone unnoticed are now reported as cases of food poisoning.

Certainly, foodborne illnesses caused by micro-organisms are a real challenge. Micro-organisms are a natural part of our world and the only way to reduce them is to take special measures throughout the food chain and during storage and preparation at home. A failure of in the food supply chain affects many people because of the potential scale of the operations. Incidents of this type usually make the headlines. However, many foodborne infections or intoxications can be traced to poor hygienic practices in the home.

Lifestyles are changing. Many modern consumers are too busy to spend time in the kitchen. They may have forgotten the basic rules about food hygiene and yet they still expect their food to be safe. Unfortunately, most foods naturally contain some microbes and raw foods may contain pathogens. Compounding this problem is the fact that many foods that have been developed to meet consumer demands for convenience and freshness (for example, chilled foods) need careful handling throughout the distribution chain and at home.

Consumers are changing. As life expectancy increases, the number of immuno-compromised and elderly people grows. They are especially susceptible to foodborne illness.

This does not mean that food is less safe today. Despite wide public perception and frequent media coverage that our food safety is declining, the food we buy today has never been safer and we should not be afraid to enjoy it. However, we take safe food for granted and sometimes forget our role in safe food handling at home.

Consumer information and education about the active role we play in safe food handling are key strategic elements for keeping pace with changing times and technologies.