

# Food Recall

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## What Is a Food Recall?

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.), a *food recall* occurs “when a food producer takes a product off the market because there is reason to believe that it may cause consumers to become ill. In some situations, government agencies may request a food recall.”

The purpose of a food recall is to prevent people from eating food that could result in potential foodborne illnesses or injuries. When a food recall occurs, there may be a situation where a microorganism, chemical, or physical contaminant would make a food product unsafe for consumption. Bacteria, cleaning chemicals, or broken glass are examples of contaminants that would launch a food recall. More commonly, food may also be recalled when food allergens, such as milk, eggs, wheat, soybeans, tree nuts, peanuts, shellfish, or fish have come in contact with the food product or are not identified on the label’s ingredient list. When this happens, the allergen involved is referred to as an *undeclared allergen*.

If a food product has been potentially contaminated, a foodborne illness outbreak may occur. A foodborne illness outbreak occurs when two or more people become ill from consuming the same food or beverage and have the same symptoms (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2021). Foodborne illnesses can range from mild symptoms, such as an upset stomach, to severe symptoms requiring medical care and can sometimes lead to death. Each year, approximately one in six Americans get sick from foodborne illness, 128,000

are hospitalized, and 3,000 people die (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

It is the responsibility of government agencies to regulate and enforce food safety, in addition to investigating foodborne illnesses. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), a department of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), has the responsibility to monitor meat, poultry, eggs, milk, and fresh produce. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates processed food, such as canned foods, bakery items, infant formula, and juice. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) investigates multistate foodborne outbreaks and works with state and local health departments to collect data on and prevent foodborne outbreaks.

To keep foodborne illness or injury from happening, companies will voluntarily recall food products. The FDA and FSIS also have the authority to remove products from the market that threaten the health and well-being of consumers if food manufacturers do not comply. Food recalls may occur with any type of food, including produce, meat, and packaged or processed foods. Meat, poultry, and seafood products have the highest percentage of food recalls.

## Stay Informed

Large outbreaks are commonly announced through local or national news or social media. These advisories result in specific, actionable steps to protect against illnesses or injury related to food. Many state and local government agencies, such as the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural

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Development, will offer notifications through their websites or email. Signing up for email recall alerts can be done at the USDA (<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/recalls>) or the FDA (<https://www.fda.gov/safety/recalls-market-withdrawals-safety-alerts>) websites. Michigan State University (MSU) Extension (<https://www.canr.msu.edu/outreach/>) provides recall information on social media through the Think Food Safety Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/thinkfoodsafety>).

### How to Identify a Recalled Food Product

Properly identifying a recalled food product will decrease food waste and foodborne illness or injury. The USDA and FDA recommend searching the food product label suspected in a recall to locate the following:

- Product name – This will be the brand name.
- Product packaging, including size – This will describe servings, dimensions, or total product weight.
- Date labels – These might be the *use-by* date, *sell-by* date, or *expiration* date.
- Lot number, manufacturer codes, batch codes, or production codes – These identify when and where a food was processed or sourced from.

### When a Recall Happens

If you suspect that a food has been recalled, check to see that the product labels match the recall information. If they do, do not consume the food. Follow the instructions from the recall notice. Recall notices may instruct you to return the product to the place of purchase for a refund or to dispose of the product.

Wash your hands after handling the recalled food products. Also, wash and sanitize all surfaces that have come into contact with the recalled product including cooking equipment, utensils, dishes, counters, refrigerators, and sinks.

If a food product is recalled due to an undeclared allergen, anyone with an allergy to that food may be at risk and they should not eat it. However, if you do not have an allergy to the food ingredient, you can safely eat it.

### Reporting Foodborne Illness

If you believe you became ill from eating a certain food, from a restaurant or at home, contact your local health department. Ask to speak with the environmental health specialist, or sanitarian, about a possible foodborne illness.



Examples of lot numbers, batch codes, manufacturer codes, or production codes used to identify food products that may be involved in a food recall. Photos: M. Donaldson, MSU Extension.

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Reporting illnesses to your local health department helps them identify potential foodborne illness outbreaks. In addition, you can contact your local health care provider to begin the investigation and reporting process. Write down what you have eaten for the last two to three days so a thorough investigation can be completed. You can also reach out to the CDC if you would like to find out more about foodborne illness at 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636).

### Prevention Measures

There are more efforts than ever in place to prevent foodborne illness, including recall efforts. In 2011, the U.S. introduced the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) to identify and manage potential food safety issues. The FSMA included new requirements and guidelines to ensure food is grown, harvested, and processed safely. These rules also apply to food imported from other countries.

Consumers can also take an active role in preventing foodborne illnesses by staying aware of food recalls. In addition, consumers can practice four key steps to prevent foodborne illness:

- Clean: Wash hands before and after preparing food; clean and sanitize surfaces properly.
- Separate raw foods from ready-to-eat foods.
- Cook food to the proper temperature.
- Chill food promptly.

### Resources for Consumers:

McGarry, J. (2015, July). *Solving the mystery of food product dating* (E3258). Michigan State University Extension. [https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/solving\\_the\\_mystery\\_of\\_food\\_product\\_dating](https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/solving_the_mystery_of_food_product_dating)

Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development. (n.d). *Food recalls*. [https://www.michigan.gov/mda/0,4610,7-125-50772\\_50776---,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/mda/0,4610,7-125-50772_50776---,00.html)

Michigan State University Extension. (n.d.). *Cottage Food Law: Think food safety*. [https://www.canr.msu.edu/cottage\\_food\\_law/think-food-safety](https://www.canr.msu.edu/cottage_food_law/think-food-safety)

### References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, November 5). *Burden of foodborne illness: Findings*. <https://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/2011-foodborne-estimates.html>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). *Recalls and outbreaks*. <https://www.foodsafety.gov/recalls-and-outbreaks>

U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2021, December 22). *Outbreaks of foodborne illness*. <https://www.fda.gov/food/recalls-outbreaks-emergencies/outbreaks-foodborne-illness>

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