

FDA's Traceback of FOODBORNE ILLNESS OUTBREAKS



Patient Interviews →

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and state and local health departments, work with patients to link illnesses to a specific food. This could include genetic testing of pathogens in samples from the patients. If FDA-regulated products are suspected, FDA will initiate a traceback investigation.

← Points of Exposure

FDA, CDC, and state and local partners follow up at locations where ill people report eating or purchasing food. This may include going to grocery stores, restaurants, and other food retailers and looking at their menus, ingredients, and supply chain records.



Transporting Food →

FDA then works backward through the supply chain, focusing on where and how the food made its way to the consumer. FDA maps this path through the supply chain.

← Distribution

Food can change hands many times before it is purchased by consumers, and all of these points are looked at to find out if the supply chains from farm to fork have anything in common. This could include looking at any opportunities for introducing and spreading contamination.



Processing →

Investigating the supply chain may lead to inspections of the facilities that handle and process food. These facilities may combine ingredients to make the food. Any ingredient, or the processing itself, could be the source or cause of the contamination or illness.

← Food Sources

Depending on what the traceback information reveals, FDA may go back to the source of the ingredients to conduct an inspection, for example, of a farm where a raw ingredient was grown.



Sampling →

FDA may collect environmental and product samples at any stage in the process. If the sample tests positive for a pathogen, such as bacteria that may cause foodborne illness, FDA will determine the relationship of these samples to the outbreak pathogen through, for example, the use of a DNA technology called Whole Genome Sequencing.

← Consumer Information

To protect the public health, FDA will issue a public health advisory for investigations that have resulted in specific actionable steps for consumers to take to protect themselves. FDA also posts notices of product recalls and works with companies to help ensure contaminated product is recalled. Consumers can follow FDA on social media and sign up for alerts from www.FDA.gov to receive this information directly.



Preventing Future Outbreaks

Companies may need to identify and implement corrective actions to address, for example, any identified source(s) or route(s) of contamination. We often work closely with these companies to help prevent future food contamination and outbreaks. FDA may take other actions, as appropriate.

*NOTE: Every outbreak investigation varies and these are major points that represent very complex food distribution networks. Some of these may not apply to every investigation or there may be multiple instances of these to investigate. FDA, CDC, and U.S. Department of Agriculture constantly monitor for outbreaks of foodborne illness and every investigation contributes to our depth of knowledge in helping to address and prevent similar outbreaks in the future.



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