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SPROUTS AND FOODBORNE ILLNESSES

Sprouted seeds and beans have become very popular in Canada in recent years. Various sprouts, including radish, mung beans, and alfalfa, have been linked to outbreaks of Salmonella infections in several countries, as well as other infections such as E. coli O157:H7. The largest outbreak took place in Japan in 1996, where 6000 people got sick and 17 people died after eating radish sprouts contaminated with E. coli. Public health officials are working with industry representatives to implement safer growing methods while warning consumers about the potential risk of eating sprouts.

The Risks of Eating Sprouts

Not all sprouts are contaminated, and the majority of people who eat sprouts do not get sick. However, anyone who eats sprouts is at risk for exposure to E. coli O157:H7 or salmonella bacteria. These bacteria can cause severe illness, and in rare cases death, in young children, the elderly and people with weak immune systems.

Who Should Avoid Eating Sprouts?

Young children, the elderly and people with weak immune systems should avoid eating all sprouts – raw or cooked. Individuals in these high risk groups should make sure there are no sprouts in salads, stir-fried dishes, sandwiches or other dishes they consume.

Sprouts can cause illness in healthy individuals as well. For those healthy adults who wish to eat sprouts, the risk of illness can be reduced by avoiding all raw sprouts or lightly cooked bean sprouts. The following steps can help healthy individuals minimize the risk of illness:

- Select crisp-looking sprouts, and, if possible, buy sprouts that are kept at refrigerator temperature.
- Avoid musty-smelling, dark, or slimy-looking sprouts.
- Refrigerate sprouts at home. The refrigerator should be set at no higher than four degrees Celsius (40 degrees Fahrenheit).
- Dispose of sprouts after a few days, or as soon as they lose their crispness.
- Wash hands with warm water and soap before and after handling sprouts and all other raw foods.
- Thoroughly wash and cook sprouts before eating.

Does cooking bean sprouts eliminate risk?

Thorough cooking significantly reduces and can potentially eliminate risk for many foodborne illnesses. However, there are no conclusive studies on the exact cooking time and temperature required to kill any bacteria that may be on sprouts, so people who consume sprouts do so at their own risk.

What are the symptoms of Salmonella and E. coli O157:H7 infection?

Symptoms of Salmonella infection include fever, headache, diarrhea, stomach cramps, nausea and sometimes vomiting. Symptoms usually occur 12 to 36 hours after ingesting contaminated food or

water, and illness can last as long as seven days. Severe cases may require hospitalization. Symptoms of E. coli O157:H7 are very similar, and can include stomach cramps, vomiting, fever and bloody diarrhea. Symptoms can occur within two to 10 days of eating contaminated food or water. In severe cases, infection can lead to acute kidney failure. People who experience symptoms of Salmonella or E. coli infection should contact their doctor immediately.

Can Salmonella or E. coli bacteria be washed off?

All fruit and vegetables should be washed before consuming or preparing. However, this does not guarantee that bacteria will be removed. You cannot see, smell or taste Salmonella or E. Coli on sprouts.

How do sprouts become contaminated?

Public Health scientists believe that the seeds used for sprouting are the most likely source of contamination. Salmonella or other bacteria can lodge in tiny seed cracks and are difficult to eliminate. The warm, humid conditions required to sprout seeds are also ideal for bacteria growth.