



January 31, 2013

On January 29, 2013 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published outbreak data attributed to eight major food categories from 1998 through 2008.

Produce is one of the listed categories (http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/19/3/11-1866_article.htm) broken down into six commodities: fruits/nuts, fungi, leafy, root, sprout, and vine-stalk. The CDC estimates that there are over nine million people falling ill each year due to foodborne pathogens. It is a challenge to attribute all illnesses to specific foods or source of contamination since the only data available are from outbreaks. The major highlight of the report was that the CDC attributed 46% of illnesses to produce. This information sounds alarming since the U.S. Department of Agriculture says that half of your plate should consist of fruits and vegetables. There have been many misleading articles released, using deceptive titles and misrepresenting the data. We wanted to take this opportunity to explain what the CDC reported and what it means to the produce industry.

The CDC collected data from 4,587 outbreaks occurring within the 10-year span. Estimates are 46.1% of the illnesses were due to produce and 22.1% were associated with leafy vegetables, making this the number one cause of illnesses (followed by dairy). **Out of the total produce illnesses, 60.5% were associated with Norovirus. Norovirus is a pathogenic virus that is highly associated with contamination from food handlers, typically prior to consumption.** Norovirus is commonly known as the stomach flu or cruise ship sickness and symptoms typically last 24 to 72 hours (<http://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/>). This data is important because it reflects the need for greater resources aimed at educating and improving food handler practices rather than increasing food safety practices at the field and facility levels which would reduce bacterial contamination.

The report stated that produce contaminated by bacteria caused 27.1% of illnesses. Since 2008, many new regulations and industry practices have been implemented, such as the Arizona and California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, the formation of the California Tomato Farmers, the Florida Tomato Mandate, and many other industry-driven initiatives. Due to these new practices at the field and facility levels, we can expect to see a decrease in the number of produce-associated illnesses during the next reporting period. We would like to reiterate that Markon has enforced the strictest food safety requirements for the past 10 years and that we ensure our suppliers implement practices that are specific, measurable, and verifiable.

Best regards,

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Food Safety Director

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