

Food-borne illnesses not diminishing, CDC finds

By [Dina ElBoghdady](#), Published: July 28

Little progress has been made in combating many types of food-borne illnesses in recent years, according to new federal data, an outcome that food safety advocates say underscores the [need to put into place the landmark food-safety bill](#) signed by President Obama more than a year ago.

The most recent figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that the rates of infections linked to four out of five key pathogens it tracks — salmonella, vibrio, campylobacter and listeria — remained relatively steady or increased from 2007 through 2011. The exception is a strain of E. coli, which has been tied to fewer illnesses in the same time frame.

The statistics also show that the government did not meet the goals it set for reducing illnesses tied to salmonella, the top cause of food-related infections resulting in hospitalizations and death. The goal was seven infections per 100,000 people by 2010. Instead, the state laboratories involved in producing statistics for the CDC confirmed 17 infections that year and about 16 last year.

The results frustrated consumer advocates, who along with industry groups [pushed for passage of the Food Safety Modernization Act](#), which empowers the Food and Drug Administration to prevent food-borne illnesses instead of simply reacting to them. Obama signed the legislation in January 2011 after a string of food-borne outbreaks shook consumer confidence in the nation's food supply.

But the administration has not met the deadlines for releasing draft rules needed to implement key provisions of the law, including one that would mandate that food imports meet the same safety standards as food produced domestically.

“Everyone was hoping that this new food safety law would be in place and we'd start seeing improvements by now,” said Erik Olson, a director at the Pew Health Group. “What these CDC numbers show is that unless new protections are put into place, millions of Americans are going to continue to get sick from contaminated food.”

Unlike last year, the CDC released the data without reaching out to consumer groups and other key stakeholders who typically are notified in advance. Instead, the charts and graphs were quietly posted online Friday. The data are compiled annually to show trends for infections commonly transmitted through food and to guide policy decisions.

“Last year they gave these numbers some prominence,” said Chris Waldrop, a director at the Consumer Federation of America. “It's very curious that they would quietly publish them on their Web site. . . . These numbers are a way to hold government accountable in reducing food-borne illnesses.”

CDC officials could not be reached for comment.

The data are based on infections diagnosed by 10 state laboratories. The geographical region covered includes about 47 million people or 15 percent of the U.S. population, the CDC said.

The CDC found that the most frequent cause of infection in 2011 was salmonella, followed by campylobacter.

But progress has been made in fighting some pathogens since the late 1990s. Infections linked to E. coli O157:H7 and shigella have dropped. Illnesses tied to shigella were down 43 percent in 2011 compared with the average annual incidence for 2006 through 2008 and 65 percent compared with 1996 through 1998.