

You Are What You Eat

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A few years ago, my brother-in-law, Mike, got salmonella from eating an undercooked chicken sandwich that actually clucked when he bit into it. He was so sick that at first he was afraid he was going to die; then he was afraid he was going to live. He felt pretty fowl for a few weeks, and he avoided chicken sandwiches for a year.

Mike is not alone. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each year foodborne illnesses affect approximately 76 million people in the United States. Of those victims, 325,000 are hospitalized and 5,000 actually die. Because this is such a problem, the Center for Science in the Public Interest recently issued a list of the top ten foods that have the highest risk of illness.

While the CDC consistently reports that meat, such as beef, poultry and ham, is the number one cause of foodborne illness, no meats were included on the list. The reason is that meat and poultry quality control falls under the purview of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service. Accordingly, the CSPI report focused only on foods regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, even though the organization advised that many meat products are far riskier than some of the foods on the list.

Unlike David Letterman's hilarious Top Ten lists, this list is far more somber. The CSPI's list consists of: The list included these foods: 1. Leafy Greens; 2. Eggs; 3. Tuna; 4. Oysters; 5. Potatoes; 6. Cheese; 7. Ice Cream; 8. Tomatoes; 9. Sprouts; and 10. Berries. So my favorite meal of a bacon cheeseburger with a fried egg, lettuce and tomato on it with a side of fries and a strawberry milkshake may be ill-advised by the CSPI, let alone a cardiac surgeon, seeing as it has 7 of the 10 foods from the list without even counting the meat.

When researching for their list, the CSPI reviewed foodborne outbreak data from the CDC where both the pathogen, such as E. coli or salmonella, as well as the food source, were known. One of the difficulties with the research, however, is that most foodborne illnesses are mild and are not treated, and thus, not reported. The CSPI's top ten list disclosed the riskiest foods regulated by the FDA, as they were responsible for 40 percent of all foodborne outbreaks between 1990 and 2006.

These foods were linked to almost 50,000 illnesses that ranged from stomach aches to disability and even death. Accordingly, the report exposed the need to update the FDA's safety policies and reduce the number of outbreaks.

Leafy greens, Public Enemy No. 1 on the CSPI's list, can become highly contaminated with common strains of bacteria, such as E. coli or salmonella. The greens typically get infected on the farm through contact with wild animals, manure or contaminated water, and then the germs follow the product through the whole distribution system. Infected people can also contaminate food by handling it improperly during preparation.

With the exception of my burger, experts do not advise people to avoid these foods, many of which are healthy. They just recommend cleaning food thoroughly and ensuring it is prepared properly before eating.

Too bad the list wasn't out when I was a kid – it may have helped get me out of eating sprouts.