Background. The Coordinated Outbreak Response and Evaluation Network (CORE) of the Food and Drug Administration is a multidisciplinary team that evaluates, investigates, and guides prevention efforts of foodborne illness outbreaks. Working with its federal, state, and local public health, agriculture, and laboratory colleagues, CORE investigates outbreaks attributed to FDA-regulated food products.

Methods. Using data from the FDA CORE Outbreak Database and the FDA Emergency Operations Network system, foodborne illness outbreaks of FDA-regulated food products were analyzed by product category; year; pathogen; and number of illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths.

Results. Since 1996, FDA was involved in 48 outbreaks associated with sprouts, resulting in 2499 cases, 179 hospitalizations, and 3 deaths. The majority of outbreaks were attributed to alfalfa sprouts (n = 30), followed by clover (n = 7), mung bean (n = 6), and sprouted chia powder (n = 1). Salmonella was the most common pathogen identified (n = 34), followed by E. coli (n = 12) and Listeria (n = 2).

Conclusion. A coordinated effort to respond to foodborne illness outbreaks enables FDA to streamline and more quickly identify, respond to, and prevent outbreaks to secure a safer food supply. Numerous product and regulatory actions were implemented as a result of these outbreak investigations, including import alerts, market recall of product, warning letters, injunction, and company closure. Although the number of outbreaks has decreased slightly since 1996, sprout contamination continues to pose a serious public health concern. The FSMA Final Produce Safety Rule, issued November 2015, establishes science-based new requirements to help prevent the contamination of sprouts and other produce. Outreach to the sprout industry is planned in conjunction with the Sprout Safety Alliance to assist sprout producers in implementing best practices in the safe production of sprouts.

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