

RELEASE 10/01/2013 - Assessment of health risk fails to distinguish between raw agricultural spices and ready-to-eat foods.

The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently published a study of foodborne illness outbreaks linked to microbial contaminants in spice. The premise of this study has generated several sensational news articles about the alleged health risks of consuming spices and seasonings. In response to both the study and the ensuing news articles, the National Seasoning Manufacturers Association is compelled to address the legitimate food safety concerns of consumers and dispel any misconceptions generated by the narratives that followed the study.

The food industry, regulatory agencies and most consumers, recognize that many raw agricultural products carry the risk of harmful microbial contamination. In fact, consumers are routinely advised to avoid eating certain raw foods, undercooked foods and unwashed produce in an effort to prevent foodborne illness. The spice industry fully comprehends the microbial risks inherent to raw agricultural products including those risks associated with the farming and handling practices at the countries of origin. Consequently, responsible spice manufacturers incorporate treatments to eliminate pathogens as a critical step when processing raw agricultural products into a ready-to-eat food. Similarly, responsible seasoning manufacturers utilize spices that are adequately treated.

The FDA surveillance sampling data developed for the study was derived from the testing of, "shipments offered for import into the United States." Regrettably, the study failed to distinguish the tested shipments as either raw agricultural products or ready-to-eat foods. This distinction is crucial in determining the real public health risk of any detected pathogen contamination. It is also worth noting that even the most rigorous sampling and testing protocols may not adequately detect pathogens that are present in a raw agricultural shipment since it is highly unlikely that pathogenic contamination would be uniformly distributed throughout a shipment. A validated pathogen elimination treatment process is designed to ensure that all portions of a shipment have been adequately treated to eliminate pathogens. Therefore, spice, as a raw agricultural product, must undergo a validated treatment before it can truly be deemed safe for consumption or use in a seasoning.

None of the outbreaks discussed in the study were attributed to spices that were treated as part of a validated pathogen elimination process. In fact, the "treated" shipments testing positive for pathogen contamination, came from processors in the same developing countries that were described to have very primitive farming and handling conditions. Would their treatment methods and systems meet the basic scientific and regulatory protocols to achieve process validation by U.S. standards?

Despite the good intentions of the published study, the FDA's approach of quantifying pathogens and determining risk by simply testing import shipments fails to differentiate between a raw agricultural product and a ready-to-eat food. The study also fails to notice that the real risk lies with disreputable companies who ignore the best practices employed by the majority of the industry. What the study yields is an opportunity for journalists to compose misleading narratives based upon a flawed premise where apparently no credible U. S. based industry sources were consulted. As a result, consumers remain misinformed and evermore fearful of the exceptionally safe foods they find in their pantries.

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