

Should We Be Afraid of Our Food?

Eric Schlosser

The cyclosporiasis outbreak that has garnered so much attention in recent months is unquestionably bad news. People have been sickened in at least 48 states, and the number of lab-confirmed cases—about 17,000—represents only a fraction of the number of people who have been infected by the parasite.

But as foodborne illnesses go, a cyclospora infection—most likely caused in this instance by the consumption of iceberg lettuce contaminated with human feces—is relatively mild: unpleasant but rarely life-threatening. The two people who have died during the current outbreak had serious underlying conditions. Other foodborne pathogens are far more dangerous. More than 1 million Americans are sickened by *Salmonella* every year; [invasive, potentially life-threatening infections occur](#) in about 8 percent of lab-confirmed cases, and cause meningitis, sepsis, and other serious complications. A botulism infection can cause paralysis, seizures, nerve damage, lung damage, and brain damage, as well as death.

A few years ago, I reported [here](#) on an outbreak of *Cronobacter* infections linked to powdered infant formula and the subsequent recall by Abbott Nutrition. Two recent botulism outbreaks linked to powdered infant formula made by two other companies have thus far received little attention. During an outbreak that peaked in November 2025, at least 48 infants across 17 states were stricken with botulism traced to powdered formula from the company ByHeart. The infants were hospitalized with severe complications; one of them suffered multiple strokes. Then, earlier this year, at least four infants in three states were stricken with botulism from powdered formula made by the company Nara Organics. All four infants were hospitalized.

[Read: The worst part of the cyclosporiasis response](#)

[A key ingredient in the tainted formula](#) sold by both companies was milk powder from [a common supplier](#)—the likely carrier of the botulism spores. Today's powdered formula is highly industrialized, with dozens of ingredients from multiple sources. The contents of a single can of formula may contain milk from thousands of different cows. Nobody has ever fed babies this kind of stuff before. From December 2025 through February 2026, more than 100 infants in at least 10 countries were sickened in all likelihood by powdered formula tainted with spores from the bacterium *Bacillus cereus*. The formula, manufactured by several different companies, including [Nestlé and Danone](#), had been contaminated by a fatty-acid additive supplied by a biotech firm in Wuhan, China.

A generation ago, an outbreak of food poisoning generally remained small-scale. The source was likely to be tainted ground beef from a local butcher shop or an egg salad gone bad at a church picnic. As the scale of industrial food production has grown, so has the scale of foodborne outbreaks. When I wrote my book *Fast Food Nation*, published in 2001, high levels of fecal contamination of ground beef were already a nationwide problem, not just a local one, because huge ground-beef-processing plants with poor safety procedures were supplying the fast-food industry.

The dairy industry now presents similar problems of scale. The supply chain for the botulism-tainted infant formula went like this: 55 dairies in California sold raw milk to a company called Organic West; that raw milk was then shipped from California to [an enormous plant](#) operated by Dairy Farmers of America in Fallon, Nevada, and processed into milk powder. For ByHeart, the powder was shipped to a plant in Iowa, turned into formula, shipped to Oregon for additional processing, packaged there, and sold throughout the United States. For Nara Organics, the milk powder was shipped from Nevada to Germany, manufactured into formula, shipped to Denmark, packaged, and shipped back to the U.S.

Government never adapts quickly, and because policies are adopted piecemeal over decades, [many federal](#)

[food-safety rules make little sense](#). For instance, frozen cheese pizzas are regulated by the FDA—but if a frozen pizza has a lot of pepperoni or other meats, it’s regulated by the Department of Agriculture. The U.S. is the only developed country that divides responsibility for food safety among separate government agencies. So it is hardly surprising that monitoring and enforcement [have not kept up](#) with changes in food production. The larger problem is that the food-safety system we have—underfunded for decades—is being methodically dismantled by the Trump administration.

The FDA is responsible for the safety of about 80 percent of the food consumed in the United States. Last year, James Jones, the highly respected head of the FDA’s human-foods division, [resigned from his post](#), citing the “indiscriminate” firing of 89 staff members. The loss of such expertise threatens to cripple the agency’s food-safety efforts. Kyle Diamantas—who replaced Jones and now serves as the acting head of the FDA—has no scientific, medical, or public-health training. He is an attorney (and Donald Trump Jr.’s hunting companion). While employed at the law firm Jones Day, [Diamantas defended Abbott Laboratories](#) in a [lawsuit](#) alleging that the company had knowingly sold infant formula that could cause severe bowel problems. Abbott lost the suit and in August agreed to pay a \$670 million settlement to resolve that case and other claims. [In a statement to investors](#), Abbott said that the settlement is “not in any way an admission of liability” and that the company “remains confident in the safety of these products.”

The USDA, which has food-safety oversight of meat, eggs, and poultry, has also suffered significant cutbacks under Donald Trump, losing about one-fifth of its workforce in 2025. At the CDC, the chief food-safety expert, Daniel Jernigan, [resigned in August 2025](#), angered by budget cuts and political interference. The number of pathogens tracked by FoodNet, a crucial CDC surveillance program, has been cut by 75 percent. The amount of money spent on FoodNet annually is a fraction of what has already been spent to renovate the Reflecting Pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

During the late 1890s, tainted and adulterated food was commonplace in the United States. Upton Sinclair’s muckraking 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, exposed a variety of noxious practices—such as making sausage from rats—and prompted President Theodore Roosevelt to support food-safety legislation. The food industry vehemently opposed Roosevelt: “We are paying all we care to pay,” one executive told Congress. The industry lost that battle—federal agencies gained regulatory power—but continues to fight back. It spends more on lobbying and political donations than the oil or defense industries do.

The tragedy is that public-health experts agree on many of the straightforward steps that should be taken to ensure food safety. And they can point to a record of success. In 2002, a year after the publication of *Fast Food Nation*, I met a woman named Barbara Kowalczyk, whose 2-year-old son, Kevin, [had recently died](#) after being infected with *E. coli* O157:H7 from a tainted hamburger. It was an all-too-frequent occurrence back then—nationwide outbreaks of *E. coli* O157:H7 were routinely caused by ground beef. Kowalczyk was determined that other parents should never have to endure her experience. Trained as a biostatistician, she returned to school and earned a doctorate in environmental science and food safety. She is now a professor at George Washington University’s school of public health. A decade after we met, Kowalczyk played a leading role in campaigning for “test and hold,” a food-safety rule to prevent meat companies from shipping ground beef until it had tested negative for dangerous forms of *E. coli*. In 2013, the rule was finally adopted by the USDA. Few large *E. coli* outbreaks are today caused by ground beef.

[Eric Schlosser: Do we really want a food cartel?](#)

Similar test-and-hold rules could help eliminate *Salmonella* from poultry. A [2022 study](#) by *Consumer Reports* found that almost one-third of the ground chicken sold at American supermarkets contained *Salmonella*—an extraordinarily high level. Strict food-safety regulation of the poultry industry in [Denmark has reduced the level of *Salmonella* contamination in broiler chickens](#) there from 14 to 0.3 percent—and, as a result, the number of people sickened by *Salmonella* has declined by 99.6 percent. But the Trump administration recently blocked the adoption of a new rule, about to go in effect after years of deliberation at the USDA, that would have prohibited the sale of poultry products highly contaminated with *Salmonella*, [claiming](#) the rule would have imposed “significant financial and operational burdens on

American businesses and consumers.” The Meat Institute and the National Chicken Council backed the move.

When it comes to food manufactured for infants, the federal government has enormous leverage that is going unused. The infant-formula industry is highly concentrated. Two companies, Abbott and Mead Johnson, control more than 80 percent of the market. Through the USDA’s Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, the federal government buys [more than half](#) of the infant formula consumed in the United States—meaning that it could swiftly mandate changes on behalf of infant health. But it hasn’t. The Republican-controlled Congress has refused to hold hearings on the botulism outbreaks or on [legislation introduced in March](#) that would expand pathogen testing of infant formula and [strengthen congressional oversight](#). The idea of putting all federal food-safety efforts under one roof is a nonstarter.

“We are paying all we care to pay”—that was the industry response in 1906, and that is the response today. It’s the rest of us who bear the cost.