Each year, an estimated 1 in 6 Americans—48 million people—contracts a foodborne illness, resulting in 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths.\(^1\) Many pathogens commonly transmitted through food have a disproportionate impact on children younger than 5.\(^2\) Some die from these preventable illnesses, and many others suffer lasting, even lifelong, health problems.

Children face higher risks when exposed to foodborne pathogens because their less-developed immune systems have a limited ability to fight infections. Also, their lower body weight reduces the amount of a pathogen needed to cause illness.\(^3\)

**By the numbers: Young children and foodborne pathogens**

- Children under 5 experience the highest rates of laboratory-confirmed infections from eight of the 10 major foodborne pathogens, both bacteria and parasites, tracked by the public health system.\(^4\) (See Figure 1.)

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* The Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network (FoodNet) collects and monitors information on laboratory-confirmed illnesses for about 48 million people, or about 15 percent of Americans. Because many illnesses are acquired from nonfood sources, the incidence rates do not reflect foodborne transmission exclusively. FoodNet data continue to provide the best measure of trends in foodborne disease in the United States.
Figure 1
Incidence of Culture-Confirmed Bacterial and Lab-Confirmed Parasitic Infections
By selected pathogen and age group, 2013

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Even though young children are more likely than the general population to get a diagnosis of foodborne illness, the incidence of many pathogens remains higher for the young than for all other ages combined. Significant reductions in foodborne infections among young children are likely to be necessary to achieve the Healthy People 2020 objectives for several of its targeted pathogens. (See Table 1.)

A recent study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention looked at five foodborne pathogens and found that *Salmonella* was the leading cause of bacterial illnesses in children under 5, accounting for more than 40 percent of the estimated illnesses and doctor visits and approximately 60 percent of estimated hospitalizations and deaths.6

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*Healthy People 2020 is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is intended to support the agency’s 10-year national objectives to improve the health of all Americans by encouraging collaborations across communities and sectors, empowering individuals to making informed health decisions, and measuring the impact of prevention activities. (Source: http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/default.aspx, accessed Aug. 13, 2014.)*
Table 1
Incidence of Several Pathogens in Total Population Is Above Target Goals
Comparison of rates with Healthy People 2020 food safety objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathogen</th>
<th>Incidence rate per 100,000 people, all ages, 2013</th>
<th>Healthy People 2020 objective for all ages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campylobacter</td>
<td>13.82</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listeria monocytogenes</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salmonella enterica (nontyphoidal)</td>
<td>15.18</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiga toxin-producing Escherichia coli O157:H7</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yersinia enterocolitica</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


- *Listeria monocytogenes* infections pose an increased risk for pregnant women and newborns. Pregnant women are about 10 times more likely than the general population to get a *Listeria* infection; about 1 in 7 cases occur during pregnancy.\(^7\) Illness can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth, premature delivery, or illness/death of the newborn.\(^8\) Many other severe complications and long-term effects can result.\(^9\)

- Norovirus infections are the leading cause of medically attended acute gastroenteritis among children under 5 in the United States. A recent study estimated that in 2009 and 2010 the average numbers of annual hospitalizations (more than 14,000), emergency department visits (more than 281,000), and outpatient visits (more than 627,000) due to norovirus infection among young children in the United States resulted in more than $273 million in treatment costs each year.\(^10\)

Effects of foodborne illness

- Foodborne illness can lead to severe short- and long-term health consequences, including bloodstream infections, reactive arthritis, seizures, kidney disease, and even death. (See Table 2.) A recent study revealed that children with *Salmonella*-induced gastroenteritis are more likely than adults to develop irritable bowel syndrome later in life.\(^11\)
## Table 2
Select Severe Acute Complications and Long-Term Consequences for 7 Major Foodborne Pathogens in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathogen</th>
<th>Severe acute complications</th>
<th>Long-term consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campylobacter</td>
<td>Sepsis, meningitis, carditis, endocarditis, hepatitis, cholecystitis, pancreatitis</td>
<td>Chronic diarrhea, Guillain-Barré syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome, dyspepsia, inflammatory bowel disease, reactive arthritis, renal diseases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Escherichia coli</em> O157:H7</td>
<td>Hemolytic uremic syndrome, renal failure, coma, seizures</td>
<td>Kidney dysfunction, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, stroke, endothelial injury, pancreatitis diabetes, splenic abscesses, gallstones, seizures, hemiplegia, cortical blindness, psychomotor retardation, irritable bowel syndrome, dyspepsia, reactive arthritis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listeria monocytogenes</td>
<td>Preterm birth, encephalitis, meningitis, seizures, bacteremia, sepsis, endocarditis, pulmonary infection, septic arthritis</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy, epilepsy, vision and hearing loss, cognitive and attention deficits, chronic lung disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norovirus</td>
<td></td>
<td>Irritable bowel syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Salmonella enterica</em> (nontyphoidal)</td>
<td>Bacteremia, sepsis, meningitis, septic arthritis, spondylitis, cholangitis, pneumonia, septic metastases, arterial infection, aortic aneurysm, endocarditis, osteomyelitis, and bone sequelae, splenic abscesses, pancreatitis, hemolytic uremic syndrome, renal failure, coma, seizures</td>
<td>Chronic diarrhea, irritable bowel syndrome, dyspepsia, inflammatory bowel disease, reactive arthritis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shigella</td>
<td>Intestinal perforation, toxic megacolon, bacteremia, sepsis, hemolytic uremic syndrome, renal failure, coma, seizures</td>
<td>Kidney dysfunction, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, endothelial injury, pancreatitis diabetes, splenic abscesses, gallstones, coma, seizures, hemiplegia, cortical blindness, psychomotor retardation, irritable bowel syndrome, dyspepsia, inflammatory bowel disease, reactive arthritis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Yersinia enterocolitica</em></td>
<td>Intestinal perforation; intussusception; toxic megacolon; mesenteric vein thrombosis; osteomyelitis; sinusitis; pneumonia; empyema; bacteremia; sepsis; endocarditis; meningitis; abscesses in kidney, lung, liver, or spleen</td>
<td>Chronic diarrhea, Graves' disease (autoimmune thyroid disease); reactive arthritis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Not all of the included consequences are applicable to children under 5.

**Source:** This table was adapted from Michael Batz et al., “Long-Term Consequences of Foodborne Infections,” *Infectious Disease Clinics North America* 27 (2013): 599-616.

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Consumer Resources

To learn about steps that individuals can take to minimize the risk of contracting a foodborne illness, please see:

“Food Safety and Vulnerable Populations”
From the Center for Foodborne Illness Research and Prevention

“Food-Borne Illnesses Prevention”
From the American Academy of Pediatrics

Policy Recommendations

Infants and young children, pregnant women, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems are at highest risk for serious foodborne illnesses. Therefore:

• When setting food safety standards, policymakers and regulators should consider the greater impact of these illnesses on at-risk populations.

• Congress must ensure that the Food and Drug Administration receives adequate resources to fully implement the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act, which includes new requirements that food producers must adopt to reduce the incidence and spread of foodborne diseases.

Learn more at www.pewtrusts.org/foodsafety.
Endnotes


5 Scallan et al., “Estimates of Illnesses, Hospitalizations and Deaths.”

6 Ibid.


For further information, please visit:
pewtrusts.org
aap.org
foodborneillness.org

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