

# Safe Tables Our Priority



## NEWS

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**"Food safety is heroic work. You may not know who you've saved like firefighters and police officers do, but you can save lives just the same."**

– *E. coli O157:H7 survivor*  
Laura Day, 2002

**S.T.O.P.**  
**SAFE TABLES OUR**  
**PRIORITY**

Autumn 2002

[www.SafeTables.org](http://www.SafeTables.org)



## Dear Mr. President . . .

*S.T.O.P. members Sarah and Elizabeth Tikriti, Thomas Brayton, Dan Capriotti, Donna Rosenbaum, and Barbara and Mike Kowalcyk traveled to Washington DC in October to urge public officials again to reform lax regulations governing our food supply. Below is part of the letter S.T.O.P. released at the press conference.*

October 17, 2002

Honorable George W. Bush  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20050



Dear Mr. President:

In a March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2002 speech, you stated that you were concerned about "this nation leading the world to rout out terror wherever it exists so our children and grandchildren can live in freedom." (*emphasis added*)

For 330,000 Americans and their families each year, terror begins after consuming government-inspected food purchased at their local grocery store, or after dining at a neighborhood restaurant, or even after eating a government-purchased school lunch. 5,000 people will die a brutally painful death this year and another 325,000 will be hospitalized because of dangerous organisms in their food.<sup>1</sup>

This minute, there is a nationwide recall of over 27 million pounds of "ready-to-eat" lunch meat contaminated with the deadly *Listeria monocytogenes* organism. 23 people have already been reported dead from this product.

Your administration inherited a new regulation that could have quite possibly prevented this latest foodborne illness outbreak and dozens more deaths - had it been implemented. Instead, your Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman and her Undersecretary for Food Safety, Elsa Murano, have stalled it, citing the need for another risk assessment before implementing it, which could take years. They have done this despite the recommendation of the Secretary of Agriculture's own advisory committee, which stated that, "*This consideration of risk may not necessitate, in all situations, an in-depth quantitative risk assessment which requires extensive resources and time, particularly if it would unnecessarily delay timely protection of*

*Continued on page 4*



## From the Executive Director

### “Rising to the Call”

**A**midst a summer full of setbacks for food safety, it's heartening to realize that every day more people are joining forces with S.T.O.P. to make food safer. We're especially proud to welcome to our Honorary Advisory Board five nationally recognized experts on foodborne illness: Daniel Glickman, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture; Mary Heersink, co-founder of S.T.O.P. and author of *E. coli O157:H7: A Mother's Battle With A Killer Microbe*; Dr. Larry Pickering of the Centers for Disease Control; Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*; and Michael Taylor, former U.S. Under Secretary for Food Safety, who now helps to shape food safety policy at Resources For The Future.

We also welcome four new Board members: Bob Turnau (Burlington, VT), Julie Marler (Seattle, WA), Donna Rosenbaum (Northbrook, IL) and Richard Dimock (Potomac, MD). Plus, we've recently added two terrific new staff members at S.T.O.P.'s headquarters. Susan Grooters and Jessica Morris are both standing by to help you get involved with S.T.O.P.'s public policy work, if you need pamphlets or brochures for your community, or if you'd like to lead a S.T.O.P. chapter to get started in your own neighborhood or town!

Speaking of leadership, S.T.O.P. would like to recognize and applaud Laurie Girand, who earlier this year stepped down from her role as Board member and Co-President. Laurie's incredible dedication has been the driving force behind S.T.O.P.'s HUS conference, the Starting Solids brochures, and many of the rich resources on our website, not to mention the new bulk juice pasteurization regulations that keep all our loved ones safer. We profusely thank her and her family for sharing so much of her time with us, and look forward to her continued involvement.

All of us involved with S.T.O.P. share a big vision – **a world free of preventable suffering, illness and death from contaminated food.** It will take a lot of work to get there, but every time someone new joins our team by becoming active, making a donation or signing on as a new member, we move closer to our goal.

– Karen Taylor Mitchell

S.T.O.P.'s 2002 Neighborly Notes program is now underway, and it offers a great way to get the word out in your community about foodborne disease prevention and S.T.O.P.! Please call 1-800-350-7867 to join in the campaign.

## S.T.O.P. SAFE TABLES OUR PRIORITY

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## Thank You

Courageous 11-year-old Elizabeth Tikriti of Yakima, Washington traveled to DC again this October along with other S.T.O.P. members to speak out about the need for safer food. To those who joined in our spring campaign, thank you for honoring this special young woman by supporting S.T.O.P. Special thanks to James & Carol Burley, Ann-Marie & James McDade, Ted & Dawn Helwig, Wanda & J. Riley Stephens, Randall & Lori Hicks, Shelley & Kevin Hudson, Toni Knowles, Catherine & Thomas Woteki, Marilyn Riley, Michael & Mistie Kinney, Paul Palandri & Karen Jones, Curt McClelland, Claudette & David Milner, Frederick Gilbert, Gregory & Susan Viti, Suzy Miller, Thomas & Catherine Hanna, John & Puck Putney, and mom Sarah Tikriti.

S.T.O.P. Reproducible Food Safety Fact Sheet ►►► **Copy And Pass It On!**



## The Truth About Food Poisoning and Foodborne Disease



### Correcting Some Common Misperceptions

**A**mericans often take “food poisoning” for granted. However, a growing barrage of medical evidence that documents serious problems arising from contamination in our food, combined with the increasing complexity of our food supply system, reveal that nonchalance towards “food poisoning” is outdated and dangerous. Here, S.T.O.P. takes aim at some of the common misperceptions about foodborne disease, and explains why it is in our families’ best interest to clean up our food.

**Myth: Foodborne illness is caused by food that has spoiled or “gone bad”.**

► **Fact:** While spoiled food can make a person sick, most foodborne illnesses are caused by bacterial or viral organisms that have contaminated the food, not the food itself. Most foodborne contamination that makes people sick does not affect the appearance, taste, smell or texture of the food.

**Myth: All foodborne illnesses are the same.**

► **Fact:** Thousands of different bacteria and viruses cause foodborne illness, and health consequences can vary from mild flu-like symptoms to death depending on the organism, the amount ingested, and the unique immune response characteristics of the person exposed. Anyone experiencing abdominal pains, blood in urine or bowel movements, or even milder symptoms lasting more than a couple of days should seek immediate attention.

**Myth: Foodborne illness is unusual.**

► **Fact:** Since people may only hear of two or three outbreaks a year, many assume that foodborne disease is only a sporadic problem. In reality, the Centers for Disease Control estimate that 1 out of every 3 Americans becomes sick from contaminated food each year, 325,000 Americans are hospitalized, and 5,000 die annually because of the severity of their symptoms. Most foodborne illnesses are isolated cases, not outbreaks. Often, what people assume is the stomach flu is actually a case of disease caused by contaminated food.

**Myth: Foodborne illness is a fleeting inconvenience.**

► **Fact:** Foodborne illnesses are increasingly being linked to long-term injury and health conditions. For example, reactive arthritis is known to be caused predominantly by foodborne diseases like *Salmonellosis*, while another common bacteria, *Campylobacter*, is implicated in up to 40% of all cases of Guillain-Barre syndrome, characterized by sudden-onset acute paralysis.

*E. coli* O157:H7 is the leading cause of acute kidney failure in American children and can also lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, blindness and death.

**Myth: Foodborne illness can always be traced to the last thing you ate.**

► **Fact:** Foodborne illness can be caused by contamination in food eaten a few hours ago, a few days ago, or even a few weeks ago.

**Myth: Safe cooking can prevent all foodborne disease.**

► **Fact:** Americans can reduce their family's risk of getting sick by understanding and practicing safe food handling. These include proper refrigeration, cooking to an adequate internal temperature, and guarding against cross-contamination. However, there are many, many instances of foodborne illness where consumer behavior does not play a role. The only sure way to prevent foodborne disease is for food producers to keep disease contamination out of their products in the first place.

**Myth: Foodborne illness is no big deal for healthy people.**

► **Fact:** Certain populations, like children, elders, pregnant women, and the immune-compromised, have a higher statistical risk of illness and dire consequences, but no one is immune from the ravages of foodborne disease.

**Myth: Foodborne illness is inevitable.**

► **Fact:** Most foodborne diseases could be prevented by greater industry and regulatory commitment to producing a safe food supply. Every time a case of foodborne illness occurs, it spotlights a gap in the food safety network that has allowed the introduction of potentially deadly pathogens into food. Food producers can and should do more to prevent contamination from happening in the first place, and the government and American families have the right to demand that they do.



## President Bush, Stop Terror At The Dinner Table

*Continued from page 1*

public health.”<sup>2</sup>

In that March 8th speech, you emphasized government’s role in assuring corporate accountability. “All people involved in our capitalistic system must assume responsibility for leadership,” you stated. “In ... the world of publicly held corporations, there are laws and regulations which hold people accountable. They need to be clear and they need to be tough when people misuse the public trust.” [emphasis added.]

Meanwhile, your Secretary of Agriculture refuses to request authority from Congress to impose tough civil penalties on companies that betray the public trust by violating food safety procedures and regulations. She also refuses to request authority for recalling contaminated food within her department’s purview.

*President Bush, your administration has now presided over two of the largest three contaminated meat recalls in history. Surely this is not what you meant by “homeland security”.*

5,000 people lose their lives each year to foodborne diseases like *E. coli* O157:H7, *Salmonellosis*

and *Listeriosis*. All of these deaths result from the unforgivable pollution of our food between field and fork. Almost all could have, and should have, been prevented.

We respectfully urge you to recognize this preventable epidemic as we do, as a shame and an outrage in a nation that boasts the most advanced food production system in the world. We urge that you declare a “war on foodborne illness”, and begin recruiting armies of professionals dedicated to public health. We urge you to arm your administration with clear vision, fair regulations and tough enforcement tools, in order to reverse the quickly rising tide of preventable foodborne contamination that results in illness and death.

Mr. President, our children and our families deserve not to encounter terror at the dinner table.

Sincerely,

Nancy Donley, President & Mother of Alex (1987-1993)  
Karen Taylor Mitchell, Executive Director

<sup>1</sup> The Centers for Disease Control

<sup>2</sup> The National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Food, “Response to the Questions Posed by FSIS Regarding Performance Standards for Ground Beef Products”, adopted January 25, 2002, Washington DC.

## Dane County, WI Chapter Established in Memory of Kevin Kowalcyk

On August 1st, the Dane County, WI Chapter of S.T.O.P. was officially announced at a press conference in Madison, WI.



### The K.E.V.I.N. Chapter– Keeping Education Vital in Neighborhoods.

Pictured are founding members John Calderone, Barb & Mike Kowalcyk, Matt & Monica Fuller, and Tina & Doug Williams with state representative Tammy Baldwin. Also present, but not pictured, were S.T.O.P.’s Karen Taylor Mitchell, Donna Rosenbaum, Renet Austin, Joanne Bushberger and Patricia Buck, grandmother of Kevin Kowalcyk.

announced at a press conference in Madison, WI. Senator Tom Harkin of IA and Congresswoman Anna Eshoo of CA used the occasion to announce that their proposed Safer Meat and Poultry Act would be renamed after Kevin Kowalcyk, who died from *E. coli* O157:H7 in August 2001. Wisconsin Representative Tammy Baldwin spoke, as did a staffer from Senator Kohl’s WI office. S.T.O.P. thanks Land’s End for their generous startup funding of the Dane County Chapter.

## Call for *Campylobacter* Victims

The most common foodborne bacteria in the U.S. today is also one of the least recognized! *Campylobacter jejuni* is a germ linked to contaminated poultry and other foods which can cause severe consequences like Guillain-Barre syndrome (acute progressive paralysis). S.T.O.P. needs your help locating victims of *Campylobacter* poisoning who may be willing to speak out to make food safer. Tell victims to contact S.T.O.P. toll-free at 1-800-350-STOP.



## The Deadly Emergence Of Antibiotic-Resistant Bugs

**O**ne March day in 1999, three-month old Jenny Rafferty began having bloody diarrhea and fever that quickly got worse. Rushed to the hospital, she lay near death for three days. Alongside diagnostic spinal taps, blood cultures and abdominal x-rays, mystified doctors started her on a sulfa drug right away – a guess that Jenny’s mother Joan calls “pure luck”. It took those three days to diagnose Salmonella B, a strain resistant to almost every class of antibiotics. Had she been given any other type of antibiotic, Jenny probably would have died.

“Antibiotic resistance compounds the impact of foodborne disease,” states S.T.O.P. Outreach Coordinator Susan Grooters. “It means that certain pathogens such as *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, which already cause severe health consequences for a significant percentage of victims, are becoming even more difficult to treat. This poses great danger for children, elders, and others whose bodies cannot wait while doctors search for a cure that still works.”

Indeed, infection with the most common antibiotic-resistant strain, *Salmonella typhimurium* DT 104, has been associated with hospitalization rates twice as high as other food-borne salmonella infections and with ten times higher fatality rates.<sup>1</sup> This strain was responsible for dozens of illnesses related to contaminated ground beef in New York and other states in 2001, and illnesses have also been linked to contaminated poultry, a variety of meats and meat products, and unpasteurized milk. In fact, the World Health Organization recently warned that “Preliminary evidence suggests that DT 104 may have spread widely in the United States during the past two to three years which may result in a marked increase in human illness in the near future.”

Nearly 4 million cases of *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* are already believed to occur in the U.S. each year. S.T.O.P. has joined forces with the Keep Antibiotics Working Coalition to alert American families to the perils of these diseases and the growing likelihood that disease-contaminated food will become even more deadly. “As foodborne illnesses become even more difficult for doctors to treat, it makes the prevention of food contamination during production even more critical,” S.T.O.P. President Nancy Donley asserts. “The American public must keep pressure on government for safer food.”

Joan Rafferty agrees that preventable contamination is unacceptable. “Nobody realizes. I’m a nurse, and I never realized how devastating *Salmonella* can be.” Noting that three years later her family’s daily life is still defined by the consequences of the severe trauma Jenny suffered as an infant, Rafferty says, “This is something that really never should have happened to Jenny or her family.”

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization Fact Sheet, <http://www.who.int/inf-fs/en/fact139.html>.

If you would like to tell your story or become a part of S.T.O.P.’s battle against antibiotic-resistant bugs, please contact Jessica at 802-863-0555.

## S.T.O.P. Speaks At Food Safety Educators’ Conference

S.T.O.P. President Nancy Donley addressed food safety educators at the USDA/FDA’s “Thinking Globally, Working Locally — Conference on Food Safety Education” in Orlando, FL in September. The conference, held September 18-20, was geared primarily towards food safety educators in the general public. Donley’s invited presentation, entitled “Food Safety Education—The Victim’s Perspective”, was the only one from a consumer’s perspective and the only one that challenged the notion that consumers bear the responsibility for the safety of food. “While S.T.O.P. supports fully the idea of educating the public on ways to minimize the risk of unsafe food, we believe the onus of responsibility rests fully on government and industry’s shoulders,” stated Donley.

Susan Grooters, S.T.O.P. Education and Outreach Coordinator, notes that several studies presented at the conference belie the idea that consumers can be counted on to keep themselves safe from contaminated food. “New research by Janet Anderson and Patricia Kendall et al clearly show that consumer education does not translate into safe food handling,” says Grooters. Both studies’ findings are online at <http://fsis.usda.gov/orlando2002/post918.htm>.

For the full text of Donley’s speech, see S.T.O.P.’s website, [www.SafeTables.org](http://www.SafeTables.org)



## When the Problem is Produce

By Laurie Girand

**Question:** What do chopped tomatoes, loose lettuce leaves, unpasteurized juices, cantaloupe, and “fresh” salsa have in common?

**Answer:** All of these produce products have come to the attention of the FDA and epidemiologists for the recent outbreaks they have caused.

This summer, fresh produce was in the news again, fingered in two separate outbreaks. In a June outbreak, chopped, prepackaged tomatoes were served to visitors at Disney World, including a gathering of transplant patients and their families at the U.S. Transplant Games. When the news was first released, 141 cases of *Salmonella javiana* had been traced to this outbreak, of which 48 were organ transplant recipients. This is the fourth recognized U.S. outbreak traced to tomatoes since 1990.

In a July outbreak, romaine lettuce from California was separated into leaves and sold in multipound bags to several points of distribution, arriving in Caesar salads at a cheerleading camp in the state of Washington where the first illnesses were detected. Ultimately, at least 32 people became infected with *E. coli* O157:H7, and one developed HUS. This isn't new news either; in 1997, certified organic “spring mix” lettuces, also from California and distributed by the multi-pound bag, caused an outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7 affecting at least 47 people.

The most critical step that can be taken to protect consumers from pathogens in produce is for producers to keep the produce from coming into contact with pathogens. Pathogens can be easily spread throughout a batch by tearing, chopping or mashing the food (including the exterior in the case of tomatoes and apples). In the last ten years, science has also shown that tomatoes that are warmer than the water into which they are immersed can absorb pathogens through their stem scars. Likewise, broken/torn lettuce leaves absorb water and bacteria through the areas of breakage. The sprout growing from a contaminated seed will draw pathogens into it so that the opposite end of the sprout will be contaminated as well.

Nevertheless, there are ways that consumers can reduce risk to their families. Keep in mind these five criteria. First, do you know how and where the produce was grown? Is there any chance it was grown in close proximity to farm animals or manure? Animal fecal contamination is the primary cause of identified outbreaks of foodborne illness via produce. Likewise, while trade agreements promise otherwise, food safety standards in developing countries are not always equivalent to the

average in the United States.

Second, question closely the sources of your produce. Are you (or the restaurant/store) buying from the grower directly or several distribution points down the line? More intermediaries means a more avenues for contamination en route.

Third, has the food come pre-chopped and pre-mixed? Processed produce products such as fresh salsa represent the commingling of several produce products. As the number of different “fresh” foods in a product goes up, the potential that that food could harbor pathogens goes up as well.

Fourth, was the food prepared in massive or bulk quantities? Again, as the number of heads of lettuce in a salad goes up, the more likelihood exists that a contaminated head is included. This is a food risk factor for bulk unpasteurized juices and for distributors of large quantities of food.

Fifth, is it possible the product was prepared by hand? If so, what do you know about its preparation? Improper worker hygiene can lead to transmission of bacteria and viruses.

Of course, no one would suggest you stop eating fresh and lightly cooked fruit and vegetables, (with the exception of sprouts, which S.T.O.P. recommends avoiding due to frequent implication in outbreaks and the difficulty in completely removing contamination from their surfaces). However, take precautionary measures. When you purchase fresh fruits and vegetables, buy the produce whole. When you prepare fresh produce, think about whether it was grown 1) in the ground, 2) on the ground, 3) on a vine or bush, 4) on a tree, and whether it might have fallen onto the ground while still at the site. Then, take appropriate cautions.

Most fist size fruit and vegetables can be boiled and peeled. Melons can be scrubbed in hot, sudsy water (quickly) or with a dilute solution of bleach. Leafy vegetables should be washed carefully leaf by leaf in the warmest water reasonable. And berries and grapes can be agitated gently under cold water. Importantly, assess the relative risk to members of your household. There may be some produce products that just aren't worth the risk for young or elderly members of your household.

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*The S.T.O.P. Produce Alert List: Any sprouts, particularly alfalfa sprouts; any unpasteurized juices, particularly apple and orange; melons, particularly cantaloupe; tomatoes; berries; and lettuce.*

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## DEDICATION



S.T.O.P. dedicates this newsletter to  
**Brooke "Peeky" Fisher**  
 December 14, 1997 – June 3, 2000

*Brooke's mother Elisa Fisher writes:*

" My daughter, Brooke, was the light of my life. For two and a half years, I knew my life was perfect. My little girl and I spent afternoons laughing and making up silly songs together. Brooke had an incredible great sense of humor and loved to make people laugh. She walked with a dance in her step, and liked smelling flowers. She loved the swimming pool and splashing her grandpa. And, she was beautiful. Brooke had big blue eyes, hair that bounced when she walked, and a toothy smile. She walked in a room and everyone noticed her. She had such presence. I was so proud to be her mother.

I used to envision the day I would walk her into her first day of school, snap photos of her and her prom date, and walk her down the aisle at her wedding. But my dreams,

my joy and my life stopped on June 3, 2000, when my daughter died from *E coli* 0157 after being misdiagnosed for five days in three different hospitals. Many doctors and hospitals failed to diagnose the *E coli*, all believing another hospital or doctor had already performed the simple test. My concerns about the possibility of tainted meat went ignored although Brooke exhibited all the classic symptoms. Each hospital released her, claiming I was over-reacting. My little girl's life ended, and the music stopped forever.

I am not proud to live in a community where the lives and safety of its citizens are governed by strong restaurant associations, preventing proper safeguards in food handling and preparation. Brooke died after eating a hamburger from a national fast food chain that was cooked below proper temperature on a burner that hadn't been operating properly for five years. Although health inspectors continued to note the improper heating temperature of this one burner, they were satisfied that the burner would not be used. On Memorial Day, when the restaurant was very busy, a cook decided to speed things along and use this broken burner just once. That hamburger was given to my daughter.

As a mother, I strived to protect my daughter from visible dangers, like looking both ways before crossing the street and staying away from strangers. But the restaurants that continue to operate and sicken our children and our families are invisible dangers. That is, until we stand up and demand that restaurant safeguards be followed and infractions be reported online and on restaurant windows for all diners to see.

My daughter, Brooke, deserved a long life that was full of laughter and joy. She deserved to be a little girl, a young adolescent, to date, to go to college, to marry. She deserved to be a mother and a grandmother to her children, just as beautiful and wonderful as she was. Hug your children extra hard tonight and please urge the Health Department in your community to close down and publicly report any restaurants that fail to take proper measures to keep their restaurants, their employees, and the food they serve safe for our children."

**S.T.O.P.'s** mission is to prevent suffering illness and death from food contaminated by pathogens. We do this by: providing information and education, advocating sound public policy, watch-dogging industry practices, and supporting victims.

**Support S.T.O.P. and help stop foodborne disease.**



## SAFE TABLES OUR PRIORITY

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**Give Fast Food Nation for the holidays and support S.T.O.P.! Order copies by calling 1-800-350-STOP.**

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### FROM THE MAILBAG

#### STATEMENT OF SARAH WITMER (AGE 7):

"My name is Sarah Witmer. I've been wondering why people have been dying from eating dirty food like hamburgers. Could you please try to find some way to keep dirty meat from being sold. I still remember being sick and in the hospital. It felt very awful and scary. It gave me bad dreams for a long time. I know how people feel who are in the hospital with e.coli. Please try to help them. Thank you."



### Foodborne Illness: No Choking Matter

S.T.O.P. regularly features an item called Giants and Germs. This issue's winners are eclipsed by **S.T.O.P.'s Giantest Germ: the National Meat Association**, which claimed in a September 3rd newsletter article that three or fewer people died from foodborne contamination in 1998. "In most states, you have a better chance of winning the lottery than dying from bad food," the NMA disingenuously wrote, placing the odds at 1 at 90,082,667. S.T.O.P. revealed that the National Safety Council statistics they misquoted actually referenced food-related accidents - like choking on a pretzel. It'd be funny if the reality weren't so tragic; foodborne illness kills 5,000 people each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.