

# Years later, food poison can bite anew

By Lauran Neergaard  
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WASHINGTON — It's a dirty little secret of food poisoning: *E. coli* and other food-borne illnesses can trigger serious health problems years after patients survived that initial bout.

Scientists only now are unraveling a legacy that has largely gone unnoticed.

What they've spotted so far is troubling—high blood pressure, kidney damage or even full kidney failure striking 10 to 20 years later in people who survived severe *E. coli* infection as children: arthritis after a bout of salmonella or shigella; and a mysterious paralysis that can strike people who had mild symptoms of campylobacter.

"Folks often assume once you're over the acute illness, that's it, you're back to normal and that's the end of it," said Dr. Robert Tauxe of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The long-term effects are "an important but relatively poorly documented, poorly studied area of food-borne illness."

These late effects are believed to make up a very small fraction of the nation's 76 million annual food poisonings.

"We're drastically underestimating the burden on society that food-borne illnesses represent," said Donna Rosenbaum of the consumer advocacy group STOP Safe Tables Our Priority.

Every week, her group hears from patients with health complaints that they suspect or have been told are related to bouts of food poisoning years earlier. Like people who develop diabetes after food poisoning inflamed the pancreas. Or parents who wonder if a child's learning problems stem from food poisoning-caused dialysis.

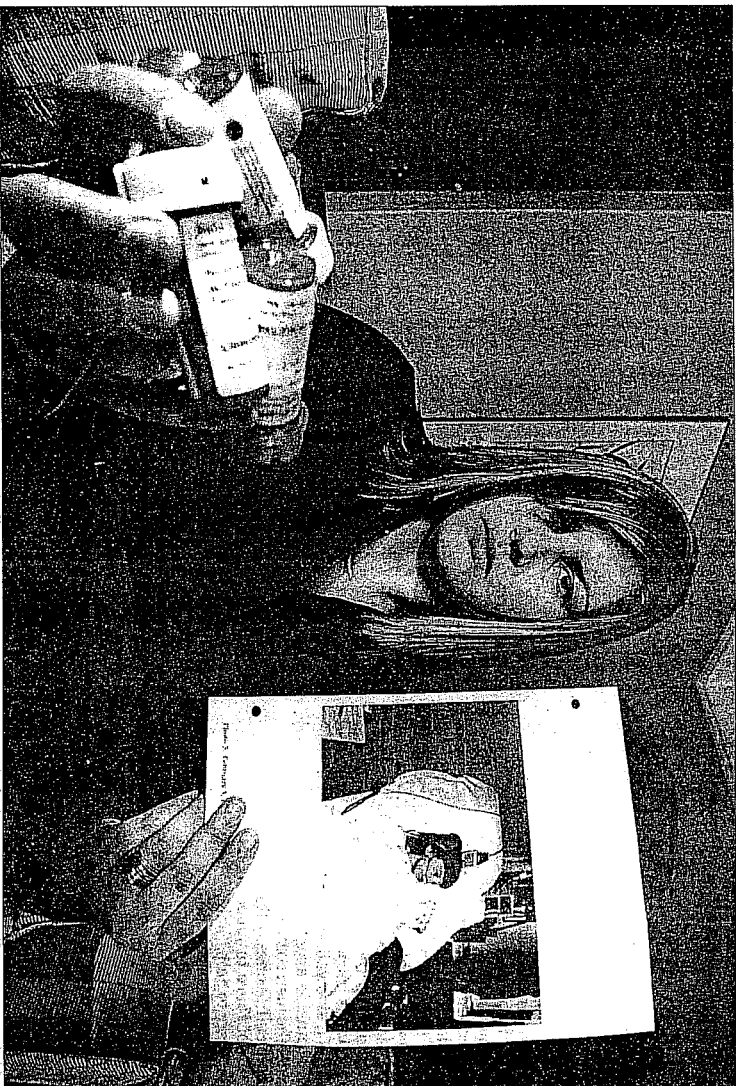
STOP this month is beginning the first national registry of food-poisoning survivors with long-term health problems—people willing to share their medical histories with scientists in hopes of boosting research.

Consider Alyssa Chrobuck of Seattle, who at age 5 was hospitalized as part of the Jack-in-the-Box hamburger outbreak that 15 years ago this month made a deadly *E. coli* strain notorious.

Now a college student, Chrobuck ticks off a list of health problems unusual for a 20-year-old: High blood pressure, recurring hospitalizations for colon inflammation, a hernia, thyroid removal, endometriosis.

"I can't eat things that are fried; I can't eat fatty foods. I [veal] never been able to eat ice cream or milkshakes," Chrobuck said. "Would I have this many medical problems if I hadn't had the *E. coli*? Definitely not. But there's no way to tie it definitely back."

The CDC says food-borne illnesses cause 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths a year. Among survivors, some long-term consequences are



Alyssa Chrobuck of Seattle needs an array of medications for ailments she's battling 15 years after her *E. coli* poisoning.

## Syndrome needs follow-up

People who suffered a life-threatening *E. coli* complication known as hemolytic uremic syndrome—lytic uremic syndrome—which most commonly strikes children—have a high enough risk for later kidney-caused problems that the University of Utah recommends a yearly exam for them in hopes of catching brewing illness early.

As they age, these people need an annual blood pressure check. Subtle kidney scarring

from the HUS could cause high blood pressure early in life.

■ A urine exam to check for protein, an early sign of kidney damage.

■ A blood test to measure kidney function.

There is no proven way to ward off these problems. But research suggests that if these survivors start showing early signs of trouble, certain medications can offer some protection.

—Associated Press

a food-poisoning legacy and not some unfortunate coincidence.

For now, some of the best evidence comes from the University of Utah, which has long tracked children with *E. coli*. About 10 percent of *E. coli* sufferers develop a life-threatening complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome, or HUS, which causes their kidneys and other organs to fail.

Ten to 20 years after they recover, up to half of HUS survivors will have some kidney-caused problem, said Dr. Andrew Pavia, the university's pediatric infectious diseases chief. That includes failing kidneys, high blood pressure caused by scarred kidneys, even end-stage kidney failure that requires dialysis.

Miserable as *E. coli* is, it

doesn't seem to trigger long-term problems unless it started spitting down the kidneys the first time around, he said. Other proven long-term consequences:

■ About 1 in 1,000 sufferers of campylobacter, a diarrhoea-causing infection spread by raw poultry, develop Guillain-Barre syndrome a month or so later. Their bodies attack their nerves, causing paralysis. About a third of the nation's Guillain-Barre cases have been linked to campylobacter, even if the diarrhea was very mild.

■ A small number of people develop what's called reactive arthritis six months or longer after a bout of salmonella. It causes joint pain, eye inflammation, sometimes painful urination and can lead to chronic arthritis.

AP photo by Elaine Thompson