

Food Safety

Recent outbreaks of foodborne illness and deaths associated with restaurants as well as products sold in supermarkets have received widespread media and public attention. Food safety issues are complex and consumers vary greatly in their knowledge of the science. However, its impact seems to cut through this complexity and can quickly alter how shoppers approach their purchasing decisions. Nowhere was the impact more noticeable in supermarkets in 2006 than in the produce aisles.

Foodborne illness is a major health issue facing Americans. The food itself does not cause illnesses – bacteria and other pathogens do. Raw foods of animal origin – meat, poultry, eggs, fish and shellfish – may be contaminated with bacteria common in the food chain. In other cases, food handlers may contaminate food with bacteria common in the human body, or ill food handlers may contaminate food with lesser common pathogens. Whether foods are contaminated at the time of purchase or contaminated by consumers, mishandling can allow bacteria to survive, reproduce and, in some cases, form a toxin in the food. Many illnesses and even deaths in the United States can be traced to contaminated food. In addition to the health concern, there is an economic impact as well with a combination of direct medical costs and a loss of productivity.

The spinach and other recalls in late 2006 and early 2007 made national headlines. As a result, consumers developed a heightened concern for the safety of commercially prepared foods and products purchased in the supermarket. At the same time, retailers have heightened awareness of their role in providing safe food to consumers.

Consumer Confidence in Food Safety Drops Dramatically

Only 66 percent of shoppers – down from 82 percent last year – are confident that the food they buy at the grocery store is safe.

Last year's *Trends* reported that while overall confidence was high, a large percentage of shoppers were only “mostly” versus “completely” confident that the food at grocery stores is safe, portending a degree of uncertainty. The report stated: “This could indicate that a widely publicized food safety issue could quickly change food safety confidence.” Results from the 2007 report show exactly that has happened. Only 66 percent of shoppers – down from 82 percent last year – are confident that

Retailers Are in a Unique Position to Help Restore Consumer Food Safety Confidence

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Survey results show an overall drop in consumer confidence in the safety of the food supply, including food purchased at retail and at restaurants. Outbreaks, recalls and food safety scares widely covered in the media have greatly contributed to shaking consumer confidence, and there has been a significant change in consumer purchasing behaviors as a result of these incidents. It will take a concerted effort by the food industry to turn the opinion of consumers regarding the safety of the food they buy.

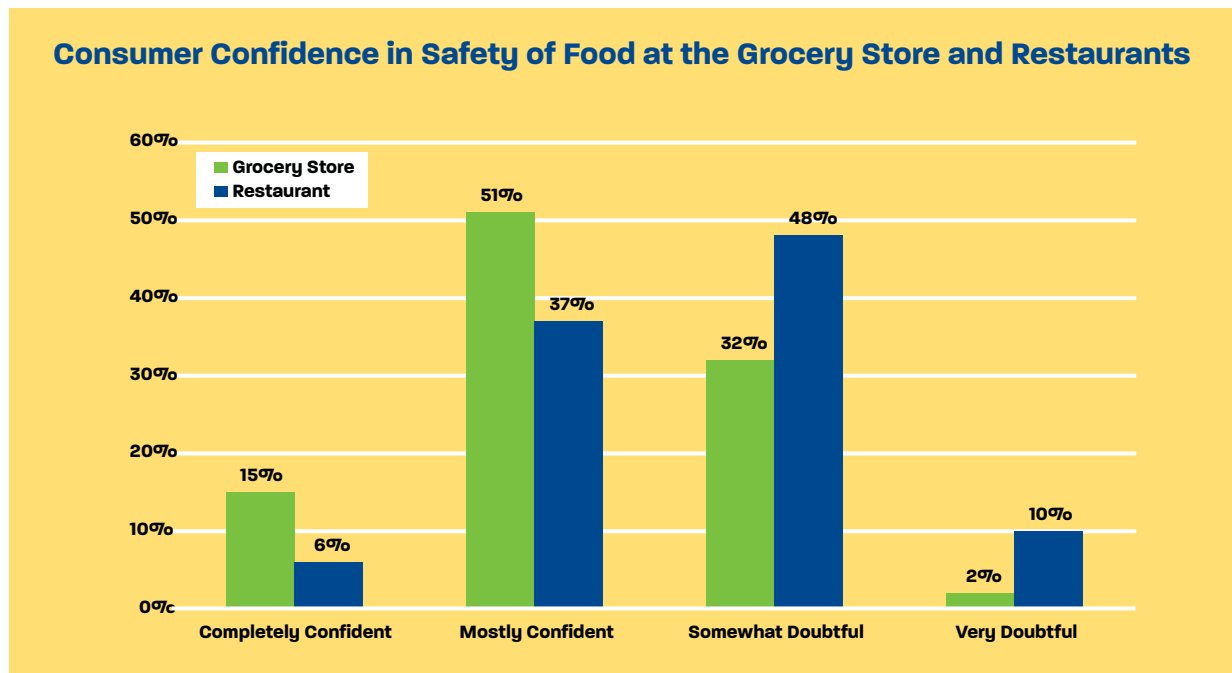
Retailers are in a unique position to help restore consumer confidence because they can enhance food safety changes from several fronts: the manufacturers and suppliers, supermarket operations and consumer education.

- Retailers can use their purchasing power to raise the bar for food safety expectations when selecting suppliers. More and more, retailers are requiring their suppliers –farmers, processors or wholesalers – to demonstrate through independent audits that food safety practices are being followed. Certification of suppliers, such as Safe Quality Food (SQF) recognition, will offer greater reassurance that best practices for the production of safe food are in place. Check www.sqfi.com for further details.
- The day-to-day operations of a store are very visible to consumers, and customers are looking for signs of safe practices throughout the store. This can be something as routine as wearing gloves, keeping work surfaces clean and having soap in the restrooms. Every store should have standard operating procedures in place to ensure associates know what to do to maintain the safety of food in the store. Food safety training is the best way to reinforce best practices, and retailers can meet all their training needs with SuperSafeMark, the FMI food safety training program designed specifically for food retailers. Using a program like SuperSafeMark allows retailers to train store associates at all levels, and provides required food handler training and certification for managers. Check www.supersafemark.com for more information.
- Retailers can promote food safety practices in the home by educating their shoppers. Information about how to properly handle and cook food can be provided to customers in a variety of ways including brochures, demonstrations and handy reminders. Stores can offer thermometers, antibacterial soaps and cleaners, and other products to their customers. The Partnership for Food Safety Education offers a wide array of training tools for teaching food safety through the FightBAC messages – Clean, Separate, Cook and Chill. Visit www.fightbac.org for additional information.

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the food they buy at the grocery store is safe. The percentage saying they are “mostly confident” dropped from 72 percent to only 51 percent in 2007. At the same time, the percentage indicating they are “somewhat doubtful” doubled to 32 percent. (Detailed table 50)

The good news is that with a structured commitment to food safety, the industry should be able to gain back the confidence of most of these shoppers. Of course this requires a collective effort across the food chain and beyond, including the government, farms, processors, manufacturers, distributors, retailers and consumers themselves.



The confidence in the safety of food at grocery stores varies widely among different shopper groups. Shoppers with children are much more doubtful of food safety. The same goes for respondents who shop at organic specialty stores. Shoppers who tend to have significantly more confidence are:

- Men.
- The youngest and oldest shoppers.
- Shoppers living in the Midwest.
- Shoppers not concerned with the nutritional value of the foods they eat.

Confidence in Restaurant Food Significantly Lower

While confidence in grocery store food is down compared with previous years, it is much higher than the confidence consumers place in the safety of foods they eat in restaurants. Only 42 percent of shoppers are either “completely” or “mostly” confident that the food they eat from restaurants is safe. This is fully 24 percentage points lower than their rating for food bought in grocery stores.

Additionally, the percentage of shoppers who are “not at all confident” is five times higher for restaurants than grocery stores. Men, both older and younger shoppers, and one-person households show a greater level of confidence in food safety at restaurants. (Detailed table 51)

Television Most Important and Most Trusted Source for Food Safety Information

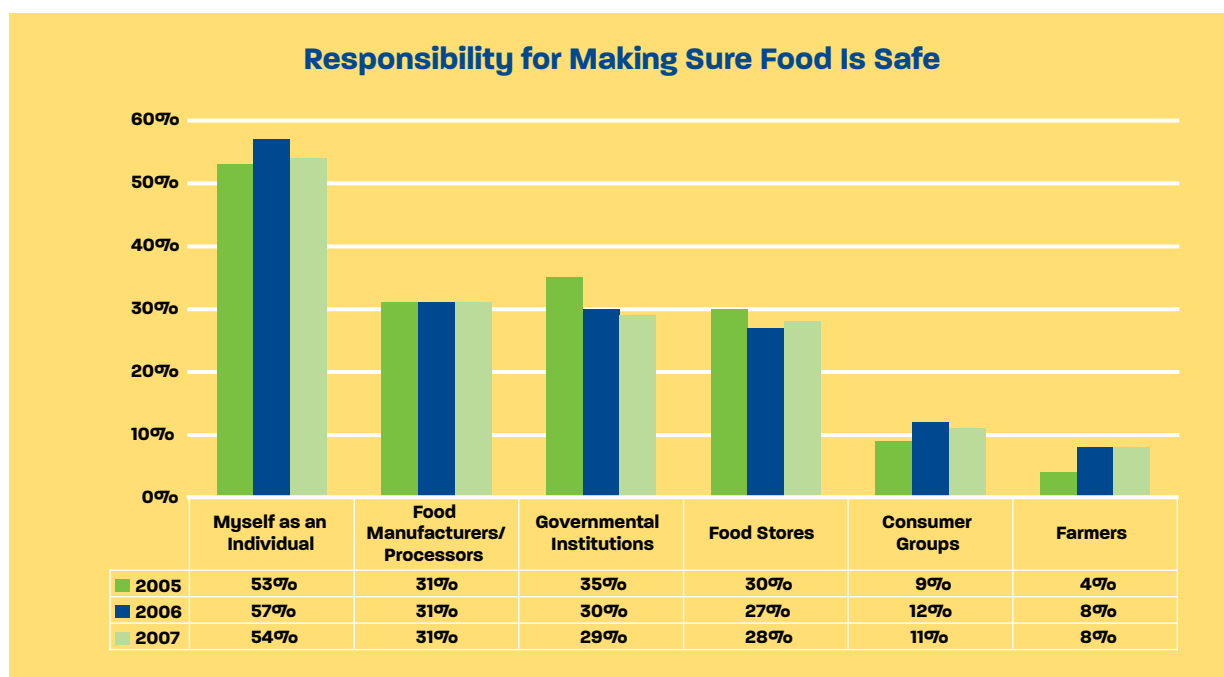
Six in 10 shoppers turn to the television to obtain information about food safety issues. Another 47 percent say they search online. Newspapers and magazines are the third and fourth most important sources for information on food safety. Shoppers aged 50 and older are much more likely to cite the television and newspapers, while younger shoppers more frequently mention friends and family. Shoppers in urban and suburban areas and from higher-income households are more likely to use the Internet. Seventeen percent of shoppers say the grocery store is an important source of information to them. More likely to rely on their grocery store for food safety information are:

- Men.
- Shoppers aged 50-64, especially males.
- Those who shop more frequently than average.
- Warehouse club shoppers.

Television is not only the most widely used medium for gathering information about food safety issues, it is also the most trusted source. One-fifth of shoppers put most trust in television broadcasts, followed by 11 percent in the Internet and 9 percent in their doctors. Generations Y and X are much more likely to trust the Internet. With television as the most trusted source at only 20 percent, public opinion on who to rely on in case of food safety breaches is scattered among many different sources. The grocery store scored low at only 2 percent of shoppers. A clear opportunity exists for the food retailing industry to become a more widely used and trusted source of food safety information and education. (Detailed table 52)

Food Safety Largely Own Responsibility

Mostly unchanged from last year, the majority of shoppers (54 percent) feel it is their own responsibility to make sure that the foods they eat are safe. At the same time, shoppers also hold food manufacturers accountable. The youngest shopper group is the least likely to take responsibility themselves and place significantly more responsibility upon food manufacturers, government agencies and food stores than any other age group. Single shoppers are much more likely to hold the government and food stores accountable. Reliance on farmers is stable at 8 percent of shoppers. (Detailed table 44)



The widely publicized food safety outbreaks in 2006 and 2007 covered the full spectrum of sources, from farms and processing plants to restaurants. The 2007 survey did not find major shifts in whom the public holds responsible for food safety, but there is an increase in the number of shoppers who point at food processing and manufacturing plants as the place where they feel food safety problems are the most likely to occur. This percentage is up from 32 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2007. Restaurants and grocery stores are both mentioned less frequently as a likely source, but farms are up for the first time in years from 1 percent to 6 percent.

Shoppers Recognize the Importance of Food Safety in the Home

Three-quarters of U.S. shoppers believe it is common for people to become sick because of the way the food is handled or prepared in their homes. Women are more than twice as likely as men to believe this is very common, especially female Generation X and Boomers. Single mothers and those very concerned about the nutritional content of food are even more likely to recognize the dangers of improper food handling, storage and preparation at home.

Since many shoppers place much of the responsibility of food safety on themselves, no less than 38 percent have stopped purchasing certain items due to safety concerns in the past 12 months. This is up significantly from 9 percent in 2006. In some cases, items were simply not available for purchase. Those more likely to take precautions and stop purchasing certain food items were:

- African Americans (55 percent)
- Self-employed shoppers (51 percent)
- Single mothers (50 percent)
- Shoppers aged 65 and older (47 percent)

Shoppers stopped purchasing a variety of items either short-term or permanently. Responses fell into five main categories. Produce leads the way with 84 percent of the responses, followed by meat and poultry at 15 percent of responses. The remaining three categories are significantly smaller: seafood (2 percent), dairy (2 percent) and other responses (5 percent). As a clear sign of the impact of widely reported food safety issues, the vast majority of produce-related comments concerned spinach.

Produce (84 percent)

- Spinach (71 percent)
- Lettuce (16 percent)
- Bagged salads, bagged lettuce or other bagged leafy greens (11 percent)

A comparison with the items shoppers avoided last year underlines just how fast food safety breaches or fears can impact food purchases. In 2006, shoppers most frequently mentioned meat and poultry at 64 percent of responses. Produce was far down the list, representing a mere 8 percent of responses. (Detailed table 53)

Shoppers also take a variety of measures when storing and handling food to help ensure it is safe. The most common measure is to keep the kitchen and eating areas free from pests and insects – 82 percent of shoppers do so all the time. Other measures taken by at least three-quarters of shoppers are:

- Washing vegetables (78 percent).
- Prompt refrigeration (76 percent).
- Washing hands and surfaces (76 percent).

Spinach Scare

On September 14, 2006 the Food and Drug Administration issued a warning to consumers about an outbreak of E. coli in multiple states with the consumption of produce, specifically bagged spinach. As of October 6, 2006 199 cases of illnesses were reported, including 31 cases of Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS), 102 Hospitalizations and three deaths all due to E. coli. In all, 26 states were affected.

Less than half of shoppers are diligent about discarding food that is past the use-by or sell-by dates, using antibacterial soaps and keeping foods separate to avoid cross-contamination. *Trends* found clear differences in perceptions and behaviors between men and women. Without exception, women are significantly more likely to take the measures explored in the survey all the time. Whereas older shoppers are more likely to take measures such as prompt refrigeration, washing of vegetables and keeping the kitchen free of pests and insects, younger shoppers are much more likely to adhere to expiration dates and use food thermometers to ensure proper cooking.

Perhaps related to the heightened awareness of food safety issues, a growing number of shoppers wash fresh vegetables, use a store-bought produce or vegetable wash and make sure they cook the food to the proper temperatures by using a food thermometer. The percentage of shoppers who thaw meat in the refrigerator each time they use frozen meat remains unchanged at 30 percent. (Detailed table 54)

Insight

Survey results show a heightened awareness of food safety issues, as well as a drop in the confidence people have in the safety of the foods they purchase at their grocery store. Many place much of the responsibility for food safety with themselves and take measures to avoid food safety issues in their purchasing, storing, handling and cooking behavior.

Action

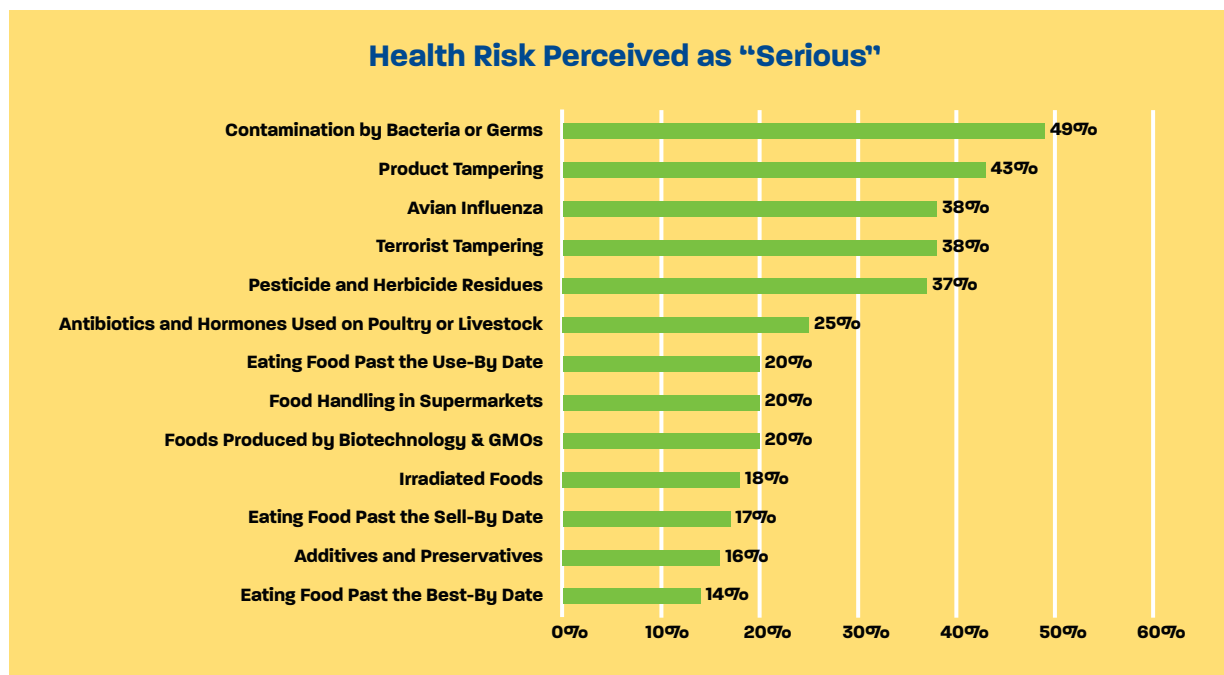
Through a dedicated and structured program, retailers can reverse the shift in consumers who went from somewhat confident to somewhat doubtful in the safety of food purchased at the supermarket. In addition to measures taken in the store, retailers can promote food safety in the homes by educating their shoppers and selling such items as food thermometers, refrigerator thermometers, vegetable washes, antibacterial soaps, and clearly display expiration dates on all products.

To help educate customers about the importance of an appliance thermometer, retailers can access free, downloadable BAC Down! artwork, customizable brochures and best food day ads at www.fightbac.org.

Shoppers Point at Bacteria and Germs as Most Important Health Risks

From a list of food-related health risks, 49 percent of shoppers identified contamination by bacteria or germs as a “serious” food safety and general health threat. Product tampering follows at 43 percent. It is notable that about four in 10 shoppers believe that potential terrorist tampering with the food supply and avian influenza (bird flu) pose serious health risks, about equal to pesticide and herbicide residues. Even though, to date, there have been no recent reports of either terrorists

tampering or avian flu in the United States, clearly the frequent media coverage has put these issues on the top of consumers' minds. (Detailed table 55)



One in five shoppers believe food handling in supermarkets may cause serious health risks, just behind eating food past its “use-by” date. Virtually all shoppers (99 percent) are aware of the sell-by, use-by and best-by dates on food products. Despite the high awareness, few shoppers consider consumption beyond any of the three dates a serious health risk at best-by (14 percent), sell-by (17 percent) and use-by date (20 percent). The three different date systems the industry uses to notify the public to consume the food do cause some confusion. As people pay most attention to these notifications for dairy products, meat and poultry and prepackaged deli meats, the opinions on which date they prefer are divided. The majority of shoppers (68 percent) prefer the use-by date, followed by the sell-by date.

	Shoppers %
Prefer Use-By Date Notification	68
Prefer Sell-By Date Notification	21
Prefer Best-By Date Notification	11

Food Science in the News

The news media have widely covered Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) or mad cow disease in the past couple of years. Unchanged from 2006, exactly 75 percent of shoppers are somewhat or very confident that enough is being done to protect them from exposure to BSE. However, shoppers seem tentative in their beliefs since 57 percent are only somewhat confident. As seen in general food safety confidence, one widely publicized incident can quickly turn the general opinion.

Confidence that enough is being done to protect shoppers is strongest among men and female Generation Y consumers, singles and those satisfied with the nutrition information provided at the store.

Products from cloned animals, such as meat, milk and eggs, have been making headlines as well. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released a draft risk assessment that the food derived from cloned animals is as safe to eat as conventionally produced food. After a 90-day comment period scheduled to end on April 2, 2007, the FDA is to review the feedback and decide whether to lift a voluntary ban. Legal or congressional intervention could delay their introduction. Until a final determination is made, the voluntary ban, implemented in 2001, on introducing food from cloned animals into the marketplace will remain in place.

Food from cloned animals has sparked much public debate including whether they present unique traits that should necessitate new labeling requirements. Three in 10 shoppers (31 percent) say they are not at all comfortable with the eating foods from a cloned animal. An additional 30 percent are not too comfortable, for a total of 61 percent of shoppers who struggle with the idea of eating products from a cloned animal. The remaining 38 percent of consumers are comfortable with this idea, although only 10 percent are completely comfortable. The International Food Information Council found comparable results in a survey of nearly 500 people in mid-2006. (Detailed table 56)

Trends finds that 84 percent shoppers agree either strongly (60 percent) or somewhat (24 percent) with the statement that it is important that all foods made with products from cloned animals clearly disclose this fact on the packaging. Only 5 percent of shoppers do not feel the need for such labeling.

Women are both less comfortable with the idea of eating products from cloned animals and are much more in favor of labeling disclosing such products than men. (Detailed table 57) The call for labeling is especially strong among:

- Female Boomers.
- African American and Hispanic shoppers.
- Shoppers with young children, up to age six.
- Warehouse club shoppers.
- Shoppers who are doubtful about the safety of food bought in grocery stores in general.

Even if the FDA concludes in 2007 that cloning is safe and efforts reverse this determination fail, years will elapse before the offspring of cloned animals can bring a significant amount of meat and milk to supermarket shelves. Low consumer demand based on safety or ethical concerns could also delay or limit the introduction of these foods. Suppliers may also reject products from cloned animals.

61 percent of shoppers struggle with the idea of eating products from a cloned animal.