Listeria Outbreak in Melons—2011

In September, 2011, Jensen Farms in Colorado voluntarily recalled whole cantaloupes produced on their farm because many people became sick after eating cantaloupes that came from their farm. To date, a total of 139 persons infected with *Listeria monocytogenes* have been reported to CDC from 28 states. 29 deaths have been reported and one woman pregnant at the time of illness had a miscarriage.

*Listeria* is the name of a bacteria found in soil and water and some animals, including poultry and cattle. It can be present in raw milk and foods made from raw milk. It can also live in food processing plants and contaminate a variety of processed meats. *Listeria* is unlike many other germs because it can grow even in the cold temperature of the refrigerator. *Listeria* is killed by cooking and pasteurization.

FDA identified the following factors as those that most likely contributed to the introduction, spread, and growth of *Listeria monocytogenes* in the cantaloupes:

- There could have been low level sporadic *Listeria monocytogenes* in the field where the cantaloupe were grown, which could have been introduced into the packing facility.
- A truck used to haul culled cantaloupe to a cattle operation was parked adjacent to the packing facility and could have introduced contamination into the facility.
- The packing facility’s design allowed water to pool on the floor near equipment and employee walkways.
- The packing facility floor was constructed in a manner that made it difficult to clean.
- The packing equipment was not easily cleaned and sanitized; washing and drying equipment used for cantaloupe packing was previously used for postharvest handling of another raw agricultural commodity.
- There was no pre-cooling step to remove field heat from the cantaloupes before cold storage. As the cantaloupes cooled there may have been condensation that promoted the growth of *Listeria monocytogenes*.

**FDA recommendations for washing and handling fresh produce:**

**Rinse** raw produce, such as fruits and vegetables, thoroughly under running tap water before eating, cutting, or cooking. Even if the produce will be peeled, it should still be washed first.

**Scrub** firm produce, such as melons and cucumbers, with a clean produce brush.

**Dry** the produce with a clean cloth or paper towel.

**Separate** uncooked meats and poultry from vegetables, cooked foods, and ready-to-eat foods.
If you are conducting any special processes in your food establishment, you must file a HACCP plan with the Health Department and may need a variance for the process. Commonly seen special processes include:

⇒ Sprouting seeds
⇒ Vacuum packaging
⇒ Fermenting

Please contact your inspector for more information.