

Salmonella: Scope Hidden

Cases of the food borne disease may be hidden under flu diagnosis

► THE 24,000 CASES of salmonella poisoning reported to public health officials a year appears to be only the tip of the iceberg. The true extent of the disease, believed to be great, is still largely unknown.

It is the breakthrough in the development of influenza virus vaccines within the last few years, in fact, that has triggered the salmonella concern.

Both flu-type ailments and salmonella poisoning show similar symptoms: cramps, fever, achiness and the rest. Healthy adults seldom die from either, but infants and old people may well succumb to both.

The continued appearance of these symptoms long after the flu vaccines should have had them under at least limited control, according to Food and Drug Administration officials in Washington, led to the search for additional causes; salmonella raised its ugly head. And the fact that many cases of food poisoning may be casually identified as a kind of flu has been suggested.

So the health officials were not really surprised last week when supplies of Starlac—a powdered milk produced by the Borden Co.—were found to be mildly contaminated with salmonella.

The theories on the growth and promulgation of the organism currently receiving closest attention is that, while salmonella can live in man as well as animals, and has been found in a variety of food products, is that salmonella is apparently transmitted to dairy animals in contaminated foods, and to man through animal products.

In light of this, the Food and Drug Administration and other health agencies have been watching animal products—particularly milk products—"We zeroed in in February," says an official.

Plants, like the Starlac plant, are inspected regularly, and samples of the products are evaluated.

"There have been several official callbacks of shipments," says FDA, but none were as extensive as the Borden case. Borden recalled shipments to some 76,000 retail stores, on recommendation of FDA.

This was despite the fact that no illnesses were reported in the Borden case, and the contamination was apparently not at a dangerous level.

But salmonella reproduce rapidly in a favorable environment—on the floor of a milk shed, a dairy plant, or in a cupboard, if moisture is present. And officials feared that even the non-toxic levels could later create problems.

There are more than 1,200 known salmonella strains. Most of them produce minor gastrointestinal infections. Some, however, can be serious.

Salmonella typhosa is perhaps the most serious type, but that typhus is only one among many. New strains have been identified at an increasing rate in recent years, as concern has developed. In some studies, the organisms have been isolated from 24% of apparently healthy cattle.

The key to the problem seems to be that, while low levels of salmonella may not be toxic, even low levels must be monitored continuously to insure against the multiplication of an apparently innocuous colony into a major public health problem.

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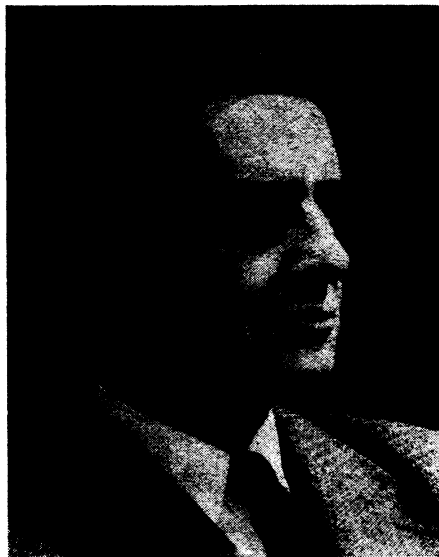
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