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March 2008: Beef Recall (E-coli)

2007 saw a huge spike in fresh and frozen ground beef recalls due to E-coli O157-H7 in the United States. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) had announced twenty-two recalls that involved over 33.5 million pounds of beef. The recalls ranged from 50 pounds at Del-Mar Provision Company, Inc. in Buffalo New York on October 27, 2007 to 21.9 million pounds of ground beef products on October 6, 2007 at Topps Meat Company, LLC in Elizabeth, New Jersey. This recall at Topps Meat Company is identified as the fourth largest ground beef recall in US history.

What is E-coli O157-H7? E.coli is normally found in animal and human intestines. E.coli is needed in the body by suppressing the growth of harmful bacterial species. E.coli serotype O157:H7 is a rare type of E.coli that produces potent toxins that cause severe damage to the intestinal lining. These toxins are very similar to the toxin produced by Shigella dysenteriae. The symptoms of E. coli serotype O157:H7 include severe cramping (abdominal pain), occasional vomiting, and diarrhea. The diarrhea is initially watery but becomes bloody. If fever does occur, it is usually low-grade.

For a healthy adult, the illness is usually self-limited (meaning, you recover on your own) and lasts about 8 days. The infective dose is unknown, but the dose may be as low as 10 organisms. Some people only exhibit watery diarrhea, but young children and the elderly seem to exhibit more serious symptoms more frequently. Up to 15% of hemorrhagic colitis victims, especially young children, can develop Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS). HUS is characterized by renal failure and hemolytic anemia and can lead to permanent loss of kidney function. Hemorrhagic colitis in the elderly can also lead to fever, neurological symptoms, and thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura (TTP). TTP can have up to a 50% mortality rate in the elderly.

What does this mean for a food facility? It means that you will need to take extra care when handling fresh and frozen ground meats. First, make sure you purchase meat from approved sources and have a good product recall plan in place. Make sure that your facility also has an effective food recall plan in place and that your staff is able to implement it. Make sure that fresh and frozen ground meats are thoroughly cooked to an internal temperature of at least 155°F for 15 seconds. In order to prevent cross contamination of pathogens from raw meats to other food items or to utensils and equipments, it is also important to make sure employees wash their hands thoroughly and properly dishwashing and sanitizing are conducted as necessary on all utensils and equipment.

In order to implement all of these solutions, training is critical. Five minutes a day of staff training would make all the difference. Why don't you try various methods to incorporate training into your work day? If you have any questions regarding sanitation or food safety, or require additional information regarding staff training, please feel free to e-mail us.