

Food companies prioritize profit and shareholders before food safety and health

Food inspectors have goals of consumer protection and safety but adherence to their advice is up to the discretion of the food retailers. The only added worry the food retailers have is lawsuit liability. Otherwise, it all comes down to *buyer beware*.

Below is a list one safety inspector made over a period of 30 years. The list is corroborated and confirmed by a second inspector.

Source: BILL MARLER via PAUL WHITE

(FOOD AND SAFETY INSPECTORS)

The list keeps getting longer — and the regulators keep getting slower

I have spent more than 30 years representing the people the food system failed. Children on dialysis after eating a hamburger. Grandparents who never came home from a hospital after a scoop of ice cream. Pregnant women who lost babies to a sandwich. After all of those cases, after all of those depositions and funerals, you stop thinking of food safety as an abstraction. You build a short list of things you simply will not put in your mouth, and you stop apologizing for it.

List of foods that may be risky to eat

Updated for 2026

Raw milk and raw-milk cheeses

Avoid **raw milk and raw-milk cheeses**. Pasteurization is one of the great public health victories of the 20th century, and choosing to undo it at your kitchen counter is a choice I will never understand. I have represented too many small children with hemolytic uremic syndrome from a glass of “natural” milk to pretend this is a debate about personal freedom. It is a debate about whether we are willing to put a four-year-old on a kidney transplant list to make a philosophical point.

Raw oysters and raw shellfish

Avoid **raw oysters and raw shellfish**. *Vibrio* does not care how clean the restaurant is or how cold the ice was. If the water the oyster grew in was warm, you are rolling dice with a pathogen that can kill an immunocompromised person inside forty-eight hours. I love the Pacific Northwest as much as anyone. I just eat my oysters cooked.

Pre-washed, bagged leafy greens

Avoid **pre-washed, bagged leafy greens**. “Triple-washed” is marketing, not microbiology. Romaine, spinach, and spring mix have been the source of more *E. coli* O157:H7 and *Listeria* outbreaks than I can count. I buy whole heads, wash them myself, and even then, I think twice.

Raw sprouts

Add **raw sprouts** — alfalfa, mung bean, clover, it does not matter. The warm, humid conditions that make a seed sprout are exactly the conditions that make Salmonella and E. coli throw a party. There have been dozens of outbreaks. There will be more.

Undercooked hamburger

Avoid **undercooked hamburger**. Order it medium-well or well done in a restaurant, and use a thermometer at home: 165 degrees, period. Pathogens live on the surface of an intact cut, but the grinder drags them through the entire patty. A pink burger is a gamble I stopped taking after Jack in the Box in 1993, and I have no plans to start again.

Raw or runny eggs & unpasteurized juice and cider

Avoid **raw or runny eggs** and **unpasteurized juice and cider**. Salmonella Enteritidis lives inside the egg, not just on the shell, so the Caesar dressing, the hollandaise, the homemade eggnog, and the runny yolks for the kids are all out. And the technology to make juice safe has existed for a hundred and sixty years. Use it.

Additions to the List of foods that may be risky to eat

Deli meats and soft cheeses

Deli meats and soft cheeses, especially for pregnant women and older adults. The Boar's Head listeria disaster in 2024 — 10 people dead, a Virginia plant cited for mold, insects, and meat residue, and *federal inspectors who walked past it for years* — was not an anomaly. It was the system working exactly the way it always works until the bodies pile up, no one intervenes. I now treat the deli counter with the same caution I treat a raw oyster bar.

Cantaloupe and other netted melons

Cantaloupe and other netted melons. Jensen Farms in 2011 killed 33 people with Listeria on the rind. The Salmonella outbreaks tied to imported cantaloupe in 2023 killed more. The rough skin holds pathogens, and the knife drags them straight through the flesh. If I eat one, I scrub it with a brush, dry it, and cut carefully—and most of the time, I just don't bother.

Raw flour and raw cookie dough

Raw flour and raw cookie dough. People are stunned by this one. Flour is a raw agricultural product. It is not treated for pathogens. We have had multiple nationwide E. coli outbreaks tied to flour, cookie dough and cake mix. Lick the spoon at your peril.

Imported frozen berries

Imported frozen berries. Hepatitis A on frozen strawberries and blackberries has put otherwise healthy people in line for liver transplants. I cook them into something now. I do not eat them straight from the bag.

Bulb onions and fresh herbs like cilantro and basil

Bulb onions and fresh herbs like cilantro and basil. The 2024 McDonald's Quarter Pounder E. coli outbreak traced back to raw, slivered onions. The recurring Cyclospora outbreaks tied to cilantro and basil keep coming, year after year. These foods get handled by a lot of hands, in a lot of countries, before they hit your plate, and they are almost always eaten raw. I wash them aggressively, and I am cautious about restaurants where I cannot see the prep.

Powdered infant formula

Powdered infant formula, for the youngest infants. Cronobacter sakazakii is rare, but for a newborn it can be catastrophic. The 2022 Abbott recall should have been the wake-up call that reformed the entire formula industry. It was not – just see the recent botulism outbreak. For preemies and infants under two months, families should push for ready-to-feed liquid formula or, where possible, breast milk.

Enoki mushrooms and other imported specialty mushrooms

Enoki mushrooms and other imported specialty mushrooms. Quietly, these have driven a long string of Listeria recalls over the past several years that almost no one is talking about. They will get someone's grandmother killed before the FDA gets serious.

The last words

None of this should be my job. I should not be the one writing this column. The Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the companies that make billions of dollars selling us breakfast, lunch and dinner should be the ones making sure none of these foods carry a death sentence in a clamshell. They are not, and the gap between what the law requires and what conscience would require keeps widening.

So, until the regulators do their work, and until the boardrooms decide that a sick child is more expensive than a clean plant — and they will, eventually, because I will keep showing them the invoices. It is not a counsel of fear. It is a counsel of arithmetic. The food on this list does not have to hurt you. But often enough, it does. And after 30 years of standing at hospital bedsides and gravesides, I would rather skip the cantaloupe.

[Take precautions if you are going to eat foods that may be health risky.]

Deli meat

Protect yourself: Heating deli meat until it's piping hot is the only way to get rid of any harmful bacteria that's present. If that's not practical, people at high risk for a serious listeria infection—those who are pregnant, are under age 5 or over age 65, or have a weakened immune system due to a condition like cancer—should

consider skipping deli meat, CR's Rogers says. For others, prepackaged cold cuts may be a somewhat safer option. They're handled less than meat sliced at the counter, and there's evidence suggesting they're less likely to cause listeria infection.

Cucumbers

Protect yourself: Choose fruits and vegetables that are free of bruises or damaged skin because bacteria can more easily enter those areas. Washing and peeling can reduce bacteria but doesn't remove all of it.

Raw Milk, raw milk cheese

Protect yourself: Don't drink raw milk. As for raw milk cheese, the Food and Drug Administration requires that it be aged for at least 60 days before it's sold, which should destroy any harmful bacteria. But as last year's outbreak shows, there are no guarantees, so those at high risk may want to stick with cheese made from pasteurized milk.

Cotija and Queso Fresco Cheese

Protect yourself: Avoid these and other soft cheeses like Brie unless they've been cooked as part of a recipe, such as a casserole. Instead, stick with hard cheeses like cheddar, Gouda, Parmesan, pecorino, or Gruyère, especially if your immune system is weakened due to an illness like cancer or other chronic conditions, or if you're pregnant. Hard cheeses have a lower water content and are less hospitable to listeria. Wash your hands after handling soft cheese.

Eggs

Protect yourself: Throw away any eggs with broken shells. Wash your hands after handling eggs, but don't wash the eggs. Doing so can spread salmonella from the shell to the inside of the egg. To kill all bacteria, cook eggs until both the yolk and the white are firm. Scrambled eggs should not be runny. Use pasteurized eggs or a liquid egg product when making dishes that call for raw or undercooked eggs, such as a Caesar salad dressing.

Onions

Protect yourself: While you can't do much about the ingredients restaurants use, for meals at home, buy whole, unbruised produce and cut it up yourself. (Slicing, chopping, and other processing in commercial kitchens can increase the chances of spreading bacteria.) When using raw onions, discard the first few layers before slicing; the inner layers are less likely to be contaminated.

Leafy Greens

Protect yourself: If you're in a high-risk group, consider skipping salads or raw greens on sandwiches when dining out. At home, you can lower the risk of illness by using hydroponic lettuce, which is grown in greenhouses and therefore less likely to be contaminated by animal waste. When using whole heads of lettuce, remove and discard the outer leaves; the inner leaves are less exposed to sources of contamination.

Organic carrots

Protect yourself: Cooking is your safest bet for veggies that can be eaten raw or cooked. Washing and peeling can reduce bacteria but doesn't remove all of it.

Organic Basil

Protect yourself: Rinse herbs well before using them. Cooking herbs in whatever dish you're making rather than adding them raw before serving is the safest way to eat them, CR's Rogers says.

Cooked Poultry and meat

Protect yourself: Thoroughly heat frozen foods. When buying salads and sandwiches that contain cooked meat, be sure they are refrigerated when you buy them and keep them cold until you're ready to eat them. That can slow the growth of listeria and other harmful bacteria.

These foods have caused several outbreaks in the past, so it makes sense to be aware of the risk they pose and be careful when handling and eating them.

Sprouts

Raw Shellfish

Ground Meat and Poultry

Uncook Flour

Unpasteurized Juice and Cider