

Unit 3: Is Our Food Safe?

Narrator: How often does food make us sick? It's hard to tell since so many cases go unreported. And globalization of food production makes it harder and harder to track. But we do know this: At least one in six Americans gets sick from food poisoning every year.

And while most of them recover without any lasting effects, many end up hospitalized—and some even die.

These illnesses can originate at any point from farm to table. Contaminated water, animals, or equipment can taint food. Unhygienic conditions can allow pathogens to grow; improper temperatures can cause food to spoil; poor sanitation can allow bacteria to multiply; and even carelessness in our own kitchens is a risk.

Take an E. coli outbreak in Germany in 2011. Nearly 3,000 people became sick with diarrhea, fever, and vomiting. 855 developed a more severe illness. The German government raced to find the source of the outbreak and warned consumers to be cautious of lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers. But 16 days later, officials reported that sprouts were the real cause. In the end, 53 deaths and more than 3,800 cases were reported, affecting 15 countries.

Preventing outbreaks like these in the future may prove challenging. In the U.S., 80 percent of foodborne illnesses are caused by unknown pathogens. But, by monitoring the risks in our food chain, we all might dine with a little more confidence.