

# **Irradiation, Training Could Reduce E. Coli Contamination**

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Two food safety experts from the University of Minnesota say better training for meatpacking workers and wider use of irradiation could reduce the danger of illness from E. coli-contaminated beef.

Joellen Fiertag, a professor and extension food safety specialist, and Jeff Bender, director of the Center for Animal Health and Food Safety at the university, agreed Tuesday that more can be done to prevent E. coli contamination in ground beef.

Both spoke on Minnesota Public Radio following a weekend report in The New York Times that described safety problems in the ground beef industry. The report included the difficult road toward recovery of a woman from central Minnesota who became paralyzed from a virulent strain of E. coli.

The two experts supported irradiation, which uses electron beams to kill bacteria and parasites. It was approved by the Food and Drug Administration more than 10 years ago. But despite extensive studies showing it is safe to eat irradiated meat, Bender said, many consumers still won't buy it.

"There really has been not a lot of consumer acceptance of it," Bender said. "It probably needs to be again encouraged that this is a safe way to eat ground beef."

Some fear the process chemically alters the food and have called for more research to establish whether a long-term diet including irradiated meat is safe. Others mistakenly believe the process turns food radioactive, Fiertag said.

"I think it's safe. It's more an issue, I think, of the verbiage of using 'irradiation,'" she said.

The researchers said improved practices for slaughtering and processing livestock also are needed. The contamination usually comes from feces that get into the meat at the slaughterhouse. Fiertag said managers and lower-level workers all need to be properly trained. Contamination also is more likely when a ground beef processor uses meat trimmings coming from multiple suppliers.

"If they're coming from different facilities ... you don't have full control of how that was handled," Fiertag said.

Speaking at the University of Minnesota on Monday, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said officials have begun to test beef trimmings for contaminants. He also

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said legislation moving through Congress would improve inspections and give the government power to order mandatory recalls.

The industry now makes voluntary recalls, but the American Meat Institute opposes mandatory recalls.

"There is not an instance in which a meat company has ever refused to engage in a recall," said Mark Dopp, senior vice president of regulatory affairs and general counsel for the trade association.

Dopp said detection as well as industry practices have improved over the years, and Bender and Fiertag agreed with his assessment.

But Bender said a bump in E. coli outbreaks in the last couple years shows there's still room for improvement. Since it's not possible to test all meat for E. coli, Bender said, food safety officials and the meat industry should remain open to interventions like irradiation and even vaccinations.

"I think we need to have a more holistic view of how we approach ground beef and handling ground beef," Bender said.

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