

Feb 24, 2010 **Have You Become Sick From Something You Ate?**

Over the past 2 years, 42% of Americans have become sick from something they ate

Over the past several years Americans have seen numerous food recalls related to our nation's food supply. Spinach, peanut butter and even pet food are just some of the food items that have been subject to massive recalls. While the safety of our food supply is mission critical for our food manufacturers and suppliers, fully four in ten (42%) Americans indicate they have become sick or ill over the past two years from what they attribute (at least in part) to something they ate.

These are some of the results of ***The Harris Poll*** of 2,010 adults surveyed online between January 13 and 15, 2010 by **Harris Interactive**.

While some who attribute an illness to a food item may have contracted their illness elsewhere, the *perception* of a food-attributed illness poses a major problem for our nation's food manufacturers and suppliers. In fact, seven in ten (69%) of those who attribute an illness to a food item think they know what made them sick.

As a result, one-quarter (26%) of those who indicate they became sick from something they ate have eliminated that food from their diet entirely. Moreover, another 15% indicate that they advised family, friends and colleagues not to eat that food item, increasing the impact of their individual experience.

Americans give Food Manufacturers and Suppliers the Benefit of the Doubt

While many people will stop a behavior such as eating a food item that they believe made them sick, most Americans do not have large levels of concern regarding the safety of eating different foods. However, among four types of foods (fresh, canned, frozen and other packaged foods), two in ten adults are either *extremely* or *very* concerned that fresh foods are safe to eat (21%), followed by canned foods (15%), other packaged foods such as boxes, jars, bags, etc. (14%) and frozen foods (13%).

When we cast our net broader and include those who are at least *somewhat* concerned we see that at least three quarters to one half of Americans are concerned to some extent that these foods are safe to eat: fresh foods (73%), other packaged foods such as boxes, jars, bags, etc. (64%), canned foods (59%), and frozen foods (53%). Those who are at least *somewhat* concerned that *fresh foods* are safe to eat are most concerned about fresh meats (31%), fresh poultry (23%), fresh fish (20%), vegetables (16%) and fruit (8%).

For our nation's food manufacturers and suppliers these findings show the importance of ensuring food safety. While Americans generally trust that our foods are safe to eat, the result of a food related illness can be a severe consumer backlash in the form of a permanent de-selection and grass roots advocacy against consumption of a food product that can extend well after a bad experience. At its worst, food illnesses can lead to heightened media scrutiny and more legislative and regulatory efforts at the local, state and national level.

General Knowledge about the Health and Nutritional Value of Foods is Low

Apart from issues related to the safety of our foods, concerns about obesity are already influencing public policy decisions, including a recent Executive Order from the President, and the types of foods available to Americans in restaurants and grocery stores across the country. While some Americans are opting for organic and other healthier foods, most Americans do not feel particularly knowledgeable about health and nutritional value of the foods their family eats on a regular basis. In fact, only one quarter (27%) of Americans feel either *extremely* or *very* knowledgeable about the health and nutritional value of the foods their family eats.

Why are Americans Gaining Weight?

Recent studies, including the annual Harris Polls on the subject, indicate that roughly two-thirds of Americans are officially classified as either overweight or obese based on their Body Mass Index (BMI). While a variety of factors are influencing this trend, between sedentary lifestyles or food choices a majority of Americans (57%) feel sedentary lifestyles and a lack of physical activity play a larger role than individual food choices and eating habits (43%). This does lead to the question, can Americans just exercise their way to better health?

So What?

A great deal of progress has been made with respect to food quality, safety, nutritional content and affordability. Moreover, food labeling provides Americans with information they need to make good decisions about their health. Yet, with the publicity surrounding several recent food recalls as well as growing concerns about the problem of obesity in America, it is very likely that issues related to the safety and overall health and nutritional value of our nations foods supply will come under increasing pressure from the media, special interest groups and local, state and federal government.

According to Chris McAllister, Senior Research Director, Public Affairs and Policy Research, Harris Interactive, "The reality is that no one benefits when problems with our nation's food supply emerges. Consumers deselect food products, food manufacturers and suppliers suffer from the backlash in the form of reduced sales and government feels the pressure to act."

TABLE 1 OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE BECOME SICK FROM SOMETHING THEY ATE?

"Over the past 2 years, have you ever become ill/felt sick from what you attributed (at least in part), to something you ate?"

Base: All adults

	Total %
Yes	42
No	48
Not Sure	10

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 2

ACTIONS TAKEN PEOPLE BECOME SICK FROM SOMETHING THEY ATE

"Since that illness, please indicate which of the following apply to you. If you became ill/felt sick more than once from something you ate, please think about the most recent occasion. Please select all that apply."

Base: Those who became sick from food in the past 2 years

	Total %
Know Which Food Made Them Sick/Ill (NET)	69
I continue to eat that food.	19
I have not eaten that food since, but will in the future.	10
I have eliminated that food from my diet entirely.	26
I advised family, friends and colleagues not to eat that food.	15
I notified the manufacturer, store or restaurant about my illness.	9
Other	5
I am not sure which food made me sick.	31

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 3

CONCERN THAT FOODS ARE SAFE TO EAT

"Please indicate how concerned you are that the following foods are safe for you and your family to eat, even if you do not actually eat a particular item."

Base: All adults

	Extremely/Very Concerned (NET)	Extremely Concerned	Very Concerned	Concerned	Somewhat Concerned	Not At All Concerned
Fresh foods (including fruits, vegetables, meats, poultry and fish)	% 21%	10%	11%	19%	33%	27%
Canned foods	% 15%	8%	7%	15%	29%	41%
Frozen Foods	% 13%	7%	7%	14%	26%	47%
Other packaged foods (boxes, jars, bags, etc.)	% 14%	7%	7%	19%	31%	36%

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 4

CONCERN ABOUT FRESH FOODS

"Which of the following types of fresh foods are you most concerned are safe for you and your family to eat, even if you do not actually eat a particular item?"

Base: At Least Somewhat Concerned about Fresh Foods

	Total %
Fresh meats	31
Fresh poultry	23
Fresh fish	20
Fresh vegetables	16
Fresh fruit	8
Other	2

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 5

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HEALTH AND NUTRITIONAL VALUE OF FOODS

"How knowledgeable do you feel about the health and nutritional value of the foods you and your family eat on a regular basis?"

Base: All adults

	TOTAL %
Extremely/Very Knowledgeable (NET)	27
Extremely Knowledgeable	10
Very Knowledgeable	17
Knowledgeable	33
Somewhat Knowledgeable	36
Not At All Knowledgeable	4

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 6

WHICH PLAYS A LARGER ROLE IN EXPLAINING WHY TWO THIRDS OF AMERICANS ARE OVERWEIGHT OR OBESE

"Recent studies indicate that roughly two-thirds of Americans are either overweight or obese. While there are certainly a variety of contributing factors, which of the following do you think plays a larger role in explaining why many Americans are gaining weight?"

Base: All adults

	Total %
Sedentary lifestyles and a lack of physical activity	57
Individual food choices and eating habits	43

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Methodology

This Harris Poll was conducted online within the United States January 13 and 15, 2010 among 2,010 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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