

Chipotle Food Poisoning – Bad Luck, Bad Management, or Corporate Espionage?

In 2013, Chipotle made the news by being the first fast food chain to tell its customers which of the foods they sold contained GMOs.

In April of 2015, Chipotle announced that they were removing GMO foods from their menu. As stated in the New York Times article dated April 26, 2015, *Chipotle to Stop Using Genetically Altered Ingredients*, the ban on GMO products did not include soft drinks, which are often made with genetically modified high fructose corn syrup. In addition, they revealed that their meat and dairy may come from animals fed GMO grains. This same statement was made on the Chipotle website.

Chipotle's move toward cleaner, healthier food and the company's transparency was not enough to avoid a class action lawsuit filed in late August of the same year. The lawsuit maintained Chipotle falsified their advertising, claiming to be GMO-free when they sold soft drinks containing high fructose corn syrup and sold meat from animals fed GMOs – exactly as they had stated. However, some ads certainly gave the impression that the entire menu was GMO-free.

Food-Borne Illness Outbreaks

In July of 2015, 5 people in Seattle were sickened by an outbreak of E. coli 0157:H7. The source remains unknown.

In August of 2015, a norovirus outbreak sickened at least 234 people (including 17 employees) who ate at a Simm Valley, California Chipotle restaurant. The location had been cited for several health code violations. The company had not been

compliant in addressing these violations in a timely manner, however, the source of the outbreak remains unknown.

In August and September of 2015, 64 people became ill with Salmonella Newport in Minnesota. The source was contaminated tomatoes.

In October, 2015, 3 people in Oregon and 19 people in Washington became ill from Shiga toxin-producing E. coli bacteria (E. coli O26). A third of those identified were hospitalized. There were no deaths reported. In response to people eating at 6 restaurants becoming ill, Chipotle closed 43 locations in Oregon and Washington as the CDC investigation began.

The outbreak continued in multiple states (9 total) through December 2015. As of December 18th, 53 people (original reports said 52, but the CDC later amended their report to 53) were reported to be infected with 20 requiring hospitalization. There were no fatalities. Of these people, the CDC determined that 88% had eaten at a Chipotle restaurant in the week before their illness started. The source remains unknown.

In December of 2015, norovirus struck again in Boston with 136 people affected. The source remains unknown.

An Internet search for previous outbreaks, before the announcement of a GMO-free menu, reveals 2 outbreaks in 2008. One was a norovirus outbreak in Kent, Ohio (at Kent State University), with 435 affected. The other was an outbreak of hepatitis A in La Mesa, California, with 5 affected. Chipotle's communications director, Chris Arnold confirmed this history is correct.

That's it. We hadn't had any incidents of this kind for several years prior to this year."

Industrial Espionage?

There has been much conjecture on social media about the possibility of industrial sabotage, that one or more biotech corporations created these outbreaks in an attempt to drive the company out of business due to their anti-GMO stance and publicity. The recent federal probe by the Justice Department again stirred the pot on this particular rumor mill, raising hope that industrial sabotage was the focus of the criminal investigation. This does not appear to be the case.

If the Justice Department were pursuing an investigation of espionage, they would be looking into all the incidents of food poisoning. Instead their investigation is focused on the Simm Valley, norovirus outbreak. This is in keeping the Justice Department's new stance on corporate accountability.

In September 2015, criminal charges led to prison terms for Stewart Parnell, the former owner of the Peanut Corporation of America, and two co-defendants, his brother, food broker Michael Parnell, and the plant quality control manager, Mary Wilkerson due to the Salmonella outbreak that caused 9 deaths and 714 illnesses.

The trial was the first federal food-poisoning case to be tried by an American court and the first federal felony conviction of its kind. It won't be the last. Criminal neglect that could result in death or disability will no longer be tolerated in the food industry, and this is a good thing.

Although the Justice Department does not seem to be looking into the possibility of espionage, it is hard to ignore the glaring facts. A popular company has no food poisoning incidents for many years, then suddenly, right after taking a stance against GMOs, incident after incident occurs across the country. The coincidence just seems too obvious. Chris Arnold says,

We've certainly seen those theories, but we haven't seen any evidence to support them."

What's Next for Chipotle?

Meanwhile, the company has announced enhanced food safety and testing procedures and that every location across the nation will close for a few hours on February 8th for a nationwide all staff meeting to address food safety issues, answer staff questions, and discuss a new marketing plan to bring customers back.

We can only hope Chipotle is successful in weathering the storm and earning back the trust of their loyal clientele.

Recommended Reading:

- *Chipotle Removing More Unnatural Ingredients – Sourdough Culture to Replace Tortilla Preservatives*
- *Understanding and Detoxifying Genetically Modified Foods*
- *How to Kill Fungal Infections*

Sources:

- *Chipotle to Stop Using Genetically Altered Ingredients – New York Times*
- *Chipotle Fires Back Against Non-GMO Lawsuit – Advertising Age*
- *Chipotle Health Code Violations In Simi Valley – Food Poisoning News*
- *Amid E. Coli Outbreak, Chipotle Closes 43 Restaurants In Washington, Oregon – The Two Way*
- *FDA and CDC probe second wave of Chipotle E. coli outbreak – Ars Technica*
- *Multistate Outbreaks of Shiga toxin-producing Escherichia coli O26 Infections Linked to Chipotle Mexican Grill Restaurants – CDC*

- *A Timeline of Chipotle's Five Outbreaks – Food Safety News*
- *435 Chipotle Customers with Norovirus, 6 Sick with Hepatitis A, but Record Profits, what Gives? – Marler Blog*
- *Feds probe Chipotle food outbreak cases – Times Union*
- *The Corporate Shield Fails – Peanut Corporation of America Defendants Convicted – Organic Lifestyle Magazine*