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The modern food chain

Stronger links needed to keep supplies safe.

The United States has one of the safest food supplies in the world, but that's of little comfort to the 76 million Americans who get food poisoning every year.

Earlier this month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta released the most comprehensive survey of foodborne illnesses ever done. It reported that 5,000 people die and 325,000 are hospitalized yearly from pathogens transmitted through food.

While the number of deaths is significantly lower than previously thought, the total number of cases is more than twice earlier estimates — most likely because of lifestyle changes, food distribution and demographics.

Food once came from the farm down the road. Now, centralized processing plants are buying and selling all over the world (even through the Internet). People are eating out more, and the aging population is more vulnerable.

These changes bring us a greater variety of foods at lower prices but expose us to more food-handling errors. Just remember the Hudson Foods national recall in 1997, the tainted apple juice in '96, or the Jack-in-the-Box deaths in '93.

At home, consumers can protect themselves by cooking meat thoroughly, drinking only pasteurized beverages, and washing fruits and vegetables. But even the most conscientious consumer cannot eliminate the risk that originates in food production.

In the last three years, the Clinton administration wisely has made food safety a priority, getting Congress to allocate more money for research, inspection, surveillance and education. The Meat Inspection Act was updated for the first time since it was passed in 1906 in response to Upton Sinclair's expose *The Jungle*. DNA fingerprinting can now identify pathogens in hours, instead of days or even weeks.

But food safety remains tangled in a bureaucratic web: The USDA regulates meat and poultry; EPA oversees water; CDC does disease monitoring and investigation; and FDA supervises the rest.

This division creates overlap and inconsistency. For example, a pizza plant will have a USDA inspector check its pepperoni almost daily, but its cheese may see an FDA inspector only once in 10 years. Further, the USDA has the bulk of the money and inspectors, even though the FDA is responsible for 78 percent of the food on our tables.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest is lobbying for a single agency to regulate food from "farm to table," just as President Nixon created the EPA to unify environmental jurisdiction.

At the very least, in the next year, Congress and the administration must step up their efforts to update the laws and streamline the bureaucracy. We deserve to savor every morsel — safely.