New Food Poisoning Detection and Response Initiative Announced

DES MOINES, IA (October 13, 2016) – Iowa State Epidemiologist Dr. Patricia Quinlisk today announced a new initiative undertaken by the Iowa departments of Public Health (IDPH) and Inspections and Appeals (DIA) that should reduce the impact of reported foodborne illness in the State of Iowa. “These departments have joined forces to establish a statewide one-call system through which Iowans can report illnesses associated with food poisoning,” Dr. Quinlisk said.

“Once a call is made to the IowaSic hotline (1-844-469-2742), trained specialists will begin an investigation into the cause and source of the illness, which could greatly reduce the number of ill Iowans.” In making the announcement, Dr. Quinlisk recalled the 2013 Cyclospora outbreak, which was responsible for sickening at least 127 individuals in Iowa, Nebraska, and other Midwest states.

During the 2013 outbreak, epidemiologists and food safety specialists, working in collaboration with laboratorians from the State Hygienic Laboratory at the University of Iowa (SHL/UI), were able to identify the cause of the Cyclospora outbreak, which was traced back to fresh produce grown and packaged in Mexico. The contaminated product had been distributed to a national restaurant chain where it eventually was consumed by patrons primarily in Iowa and Nebraska.

“Iowa was the first state to positively identify the cause of the outbreak, which permitted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to trace it back to the source,” Dr. Quinlisk added. “Had the IowaSic hotline and supporting processes been in place in 2013, it’s possible that the duration and impact of the outbreak on the consuming public could have been greatly reduced.”

The IowaSic hotline will be answered by specialists in the Public Health Department, who will ask callers about the nature of the illness, the symptoms experienced, the onset and duration, and also complete a history of all foods consumed for the past several days. Illnesses associated with foods purchased from or consumed at food establishments will be investigated by staff in DIA’s Food and Consumer Safety Bureau.

Food poisoning happens after eating or drinking contaminated foods or beverages. Contamination can occur at any time throughout the food preparation process, including storage, cooking, and service. Often, foodborne illness is the result of cross-contamination, poor hygiene, or improper heating and cooling or prepared foods.

“If you suspect food poisoning after consuming food from a restaurant, grocery store, convenience store, market or public gathering, call IDPH’s IowaSic hotline at 1-844-469-2742,” Dr. Quinlisk said. “Your call will make it possible for public health officials to assess the risk and impact of foodborne illnesses, which could prevent an outbreak and potentially save lives.”

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