



State Comptroller and Ombudsman
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Ministry of Health

Ministry of Health's Actions to Prevent Health Damage from Exposure to Contaminants and Pesticides in Food Products

Abstract



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Background

A food contaminant is any material that is not intentionally added to the food, and its presence in it is due to environmental contamination, improper preparation, inadequate handling, packaging, transport, storage, maintenance and more. Exposure to food contaminants can harm human health and even lead to death.

Examples of biological contaminants

- The Listeria bacterium, the cause of Listeriosis disease, is the leading cause of death among food-borne contaminants; it mainly affects the elderly, the immunocompromised and pregnant women and can cause complications and mortality among these population.
- The Salmonella bacterium is the cause of Salmonellosis disease, the symptoms of which will most often manifest in bowel dysfunction. In some cases, the bacterium can cause a serious illness that can end in death, especially in children.
- The Campylobacter bacterium causes Campylobacteriosis, which is manifested by intestinal and diarrheal illness, the complications of which can cause severe neurological damage and even life-threatening grave infection.

Example of chemical pollutants

- Dioxins are toxic substances that can impair the development of the fetus and the reproductive system, damage the immune system, lead to hormonal system disruption and even cause cancer.
- As part of the Ministry of Health's responsibility for public health, its role is to monitor food produced in Israel and imported thereto, through the public health services at the Ministry of Health - the National Food Services.

Key figures**0.85**

Listeriosis patients per 100,000 people in Israel in 2018

2-fold

The approximate increase in serious cases of Listeriosis in Israel from 2008 to 2018

33

People contracted Listeriosis in Israel in the years 2017 - 2018

54

Salmonellosis patients per 100,000 people in Israel in 2017

88

People were infected with Salmonella Concord bacteria in Israel in the years 2018 - 2019, more than half of them children

10

Only about 10 marketers were registered in January 2020 in the Register of Food Marketers from the Palestinian Authority's (PA) territory to Israel, and another 80 were in the process of registration

400

Notices of food products removed from the shelves (recall notices) were published on the Ministry of Health website in Hebrew in the years 2010 - 2019

1000 NIS

The amount of the administrative fines actually imposed by the National Food Services for an administrative offense of manufacturers, importers and food marketers. The law allows a financial sanction of up to NIS 40,000

Audit Actions










In February - November 2019, the State Comptroller's Office examined the Ministry of Health's actions to prevent harm to public health from exposure to contaminants and pesticides in food products, including: operations to detect contaminants in food products; to handle incidents where contaminants associated with extensive morbidity were found in products; to monitor food products produced in the Palestinian Authority. The information that the Ministry of Health provides to the public regarding prevention of exposure to contaminants and taking effective enforcement action was also examined.



The Situation Reflected in the Audit Findings



-  The National Food Services did sample food products in 2017 - 2019, but it did not set national goals for sampling to detect the presence of *Listeria* bacteria.
-  Sampling to detect pesticide residues in fruits and vegetables carried out by the District Branches of the National Food Services, especially in Tel Aviv and the North, was incomplete; this is particularly evident in the Tel Aviv District Branch where partial or no sampling at all was carried out for long periods. In addition, the National Food Services headquarters did not receive a report of the sampling from the District Branches, thus the National Food Services did not have a complete picture of the consumers' exposure to food pesticides.
-  Despite the rise in the rate of illness from the *Campylobacter* bacteria in Israel, the Ministry of Health, unlike the requirement in other developed countries, does not require checking the presence of the *Campylobacter* bacterium in food products and therefore the laboratories do not check the presence of this bacterium in food products.
-  National Food Services supervisors do not examine standard food products brought from the PA and these products are marketed in Israel without testing (a "standard" food product is differentiated from food that is defined as "sensitive" such as dairy and baby food). In the absence of full registration of PA marketers, the National Food Services cannot locate food products that were or may be harmful to public health brought to Israel from the PA and stop their sale to the public.
-  In two cases of large-scale illness that occurred in Israel in 2018 and 2019 that were examined by the audit, the National Food Services did not take immediate actions to perform a recall or, at least, stop the sale of products concerning which alarms from Israel and abroad were received about infection due to *Salmonella* Concord bacteria.
-  The five recall notices published by the Ministry of Health on its website in 2018 and 2019, in respect of the three cases of large-scale illness reviewed in the audit, following the presence of *Listeria* or *Salmonella* Concord bacteria in food products - did not reflect the full information on the presence of bacteria and did not appear in the English and Arabic languages.
-  The Ministry of Health has not yet formulated a detailed procedure governing the establishment and operation of the monetary sanctions system and its enforcement policy towards food manufacturers, importers or marketers. In practice, the National Food Services make use only of low administrative fines.



During the large-scale Listeriosis event that took place in 2017 - 2018, the South District Health Bureau took necessary action, and from August 2017 to November 2018, sampled hundreds of food products in an attempt to locate the source of the infection.

In 2017 and 2018, the number of food products sampled by the National Food Services' District Branches in the Tel Aviv and North districts increased in line with the increase in the annual budget of the National Food Services during those years (by contrast, the number of food products sampled by the regional branches in Central and Ashkelon Districts decreased).

Main Audit Recommendations



The State Comptroller's Office recommends that the Ministry of Health examine the reasons for the significant increase in Listeriosis cases in Israel. The National Food Services should work to set national goals and prioritize the oversight activities carried out by the District Branches. In order to optimize the process, it is appropriate that this be done on the basis of national risk management focused on Listeria contamination.



The lack of Israeli laboratories' ability to test dioxins in food products increases the need for the National Food Services to ensure routine monitoring of dioxin levels in food products, in order to prevent illness and maintain public health. In order to optimize the monitoring process, it is important that the process be carried out in accordance with a multi-year program based on risk management.



It is proposed that the Ministry of Health consider regulating a mechanism to determine who has the authority to issue guidelines in cases of concern about food contamination that could adversely affect public health. In this context, it is proposed that the Ministry consider explicit delineation of the powers and functions of the National Food Services Administration and the district physicians.



It is appropriate that the Ministry regulate effective public information means regarding the provision of recall notices and that the information to the public on the Ministry of Health's website be provided not only in Hebrew but in other languages as well.



It is appropriate that the National Food Services enact administrative regulations setting out the manner in which it is to receive information from various bodies in Israel (such as the central laboratories of the Ministry of Health) regarding suspicion that a particular food product may be harmful.



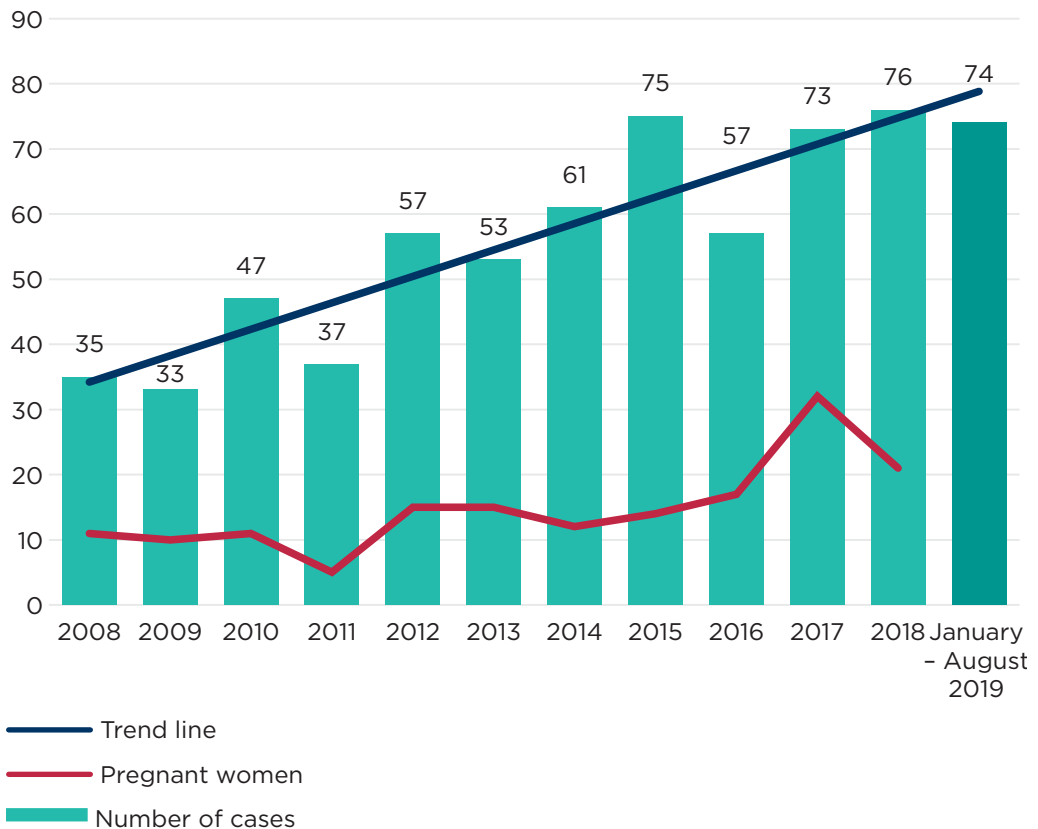
It is suggested to the National Food Services to consider a regular, ongoing format for monitoring the warnings of foreign entities concerned with these issues, such as the US Food and Drug Administration (the FDA), about suspected contamination in food products manufactured in Israel or imported thereto, and for deciding upon the steps to be taken following such warnings; inter alia, it is appropriate for the Ministry of Health to determine which foreign bodies should be monitored for such warnings.



Summary

The Ministry of Health is responsible for public health, including the monitoring of food produced in Israel or imported thereto. The deficiencies found in the audit indicate problems with the functioning of the Public Health Services in the Ministry of Health, and in particular the National Food Services, with regard to the need to prevent the consumption of contaminated food products which may cause illness. The Ministry of Health must act so that the National Food Services improve their control and oversight of food products as well as enforcement actions against food dealers who have violated the relevant legal provisions.

The serious Listeriosis morbidity data in Israel, 2008 to August 2019



According to the Ministry of Health's data, processed by the State Comptroller's Office.

