

FROZEN BERRIES HEPATITIS A VIRUS OUTBREAK FACT SHEET

Published: 2nd June 2017¹

Introduction

An outbreak of foodborne illness attributed to hepatitis A virus (HAV) has taken place in Australia. At least four people have become infected. The source of the outbreak is 300 gram packs of Creative Gourmet Frozen Mixed Berries with a best-before date of 15 January 2021. This product was recalled nationally on 2nd June 2017 as a precaution.

The berries in the product were sourced from Canada and China in early 2015 and were processed in China before importation by Entyce Food Ingredients, based in Victoria. The product was distributed to consumers through IGA, Foodworks, Foodland, SPAR, Supabarn and other independent retailers. The virus has an identical sequence to 2015 outbreak.

Discussion – The Facts

This recall has generated consumer interest following a similar recall in February 2015, when over 30 cases of hepatitis A virus infection were attributed to Nanna's and Creative Gourmet branded frozen berry products.

Q: How are consumers protected and what went wrong?

Food safety in Australia comes under the regulatory authority of Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and the Australian Food Standards Code as adopted by the States and Territories. The Code stipulates, among other things, that so-called 'food businesses' must implement a food safety program based on Codex HACCP. Such a program includes the ability to manage suppliers. Clearly, despite the preventive controls in place, a contamination event has taken place and passed undetected through the supply chain.

Q: Are imports 'Beyond the law' in Australia?

The Food Standards Code is designed to protect Australian consumers. It applies equally to domestic production and imported food such as fresh and processed produce. Imports are not 'beyond the law'.

Q: Should the Imported Foods Inspection Scheme have detected this contamination?

Consumer attention often focusses on the Imported Food Inspection Scheme (IFIS) and its surveillance testing regime of five percent of consignments. The recent announcement that Australian authorities will be given greater powers to help stop unsafe foods from entering the country will improve the capability of the IFIS. These changes are a consequence of the 2015 hepatitis A virus frozen berries outbreak. The new legislation, when enacted, will allow authorities

¹ The information in this document is correct as at 2nd June 2017

to hold suspect food in Customs if they suspect the food may pose a serious risk to human health. It also requires imports to be produced under internationally recognised food safety controls.

The new legislation also puts greater responsibility and consequences on importers to ensure the food they import into Australia is safe. Importers risk significant penalties, including up to 10 years in jail for some offences.

The product that is the subject of this recall was imported prior to recent announcements that tighten import controls.

Q: Is the Imported Food Inspection Scheme the only testing that is conducted?

The Imported Food Inspection Scheme is NOT the only opportunity for imported product to be tested for microbiological (or chemical) contaminants. It is minor in the bigger picture of managing food safety in Australia. Testing is a verification activity and is generally required for food safety certification. Testing verifies if good agricultural practices such as effectively treating water and adhering to good personal hygiene practices have been followed during production and packing. Testing is a snapshot in time and is not a guarantee that all product is safe. Testing can be of raw materials and finished product depending on the risk assessment. Food safety verification testing applies regardless of whether product is produced domestically or imported.

Q: How widespread is food safety certification, and hence verification testing?

Food safety certification is commercially mandatory to supply any of Australia's major retailers, who collectively account for over seventy percent of the fresh produce grown in Australia. Food safety certification is the primary mechanism for managing food safety risk, which in turn makes it the primary mechanism for protecting the reputation and value of our most trusted food brands.

Q: Is this outbreak the fault of our regulations?

A foodborne illness outbreak is not a sign of the failure of regulation. Our regulatory system is widely recognised as being very good. Outbreaks are usually the result of short-term human error and are best resolved by corrective action, putting processes in place to address the cause of the problem. The preventive controls already in place should be capable of preventing outbreaks such as this.

Q: So how do Australian food businesses meet the regulatory requirements of the Food Standards Code?

The majority of Australian fresh and processing produce is grown, packed and processed under one or more internationally recognised food safety standards, such as SQF, BRC, Freshcare and GLOBALG.A.P. This is not the exclusive domain of the Australian industry. Localised variations of Good Agricultural Practice Programs including NZGAP, ChinaGAP, ChileGAP and CanadaGAP exist in many countries. Australian retailers require their international suppliers to be certified to the same standards as Australian growers. The audits to these schemes are often conducted by Australian auditors.

Q: Can the food industry guarantee food safety?

No. Despite the widespread implementation of food safety standards and government regulation, foodborne illness incidents continue to occur globally. We are fortunate that not many serious outbreaks have occurred in Australia. Outbreaks of this nature are rare but they do occur and industry learns and improves from each one.

Q: Sounds like all this imported food is creating more illness than ever. Is this true?

There is an overall declining trend in the number of foodborne illnesses in Australia despite the substantial increase in imports. Circa 2010, there were an estimated annual 4.1 million (90% CrI: 2.3–6.4 million) cases of foodborne gastroenteritis acquired in Australia, including an estimated annual 31,920 (90% CrI: 29,500–35,500) hospitalisations and 86 (90% CrI: 70–105) deaths due to foodborne illness. This equates to an average of approximately one episode of foodborne gastroenteritis every five years per person. There were an estimated 4.3 million (90% CrI: 2.2–7.3 million) episodes of foodborne gastroenteritis circa 2000. Taking into account changes in population size, applying these equivalent methods suggests a 17% decrease in the rate of foodborne gastroenteritis between 2000 and 2010. While foodborne salmonellosis was estimated to have increased by 24% over this period, illnesses from hepatitis A decreased from 245 cases circa 2000 to 40 cases circa 2010, representing a rate decrease of 85%. (Australian Government Department of Health, 2014)

Q: What is the fruit and vegetable industry doing to address food safety, long term?

The great majority of Australian fresh fruit, vegetables and nuts are produced under food safety systems that meet or exceed global best practice. The recent introduction of the Harmonised Australian Retailer Produce Scheme (HARPS; www.harpsonline.com.au) further cements the Australian industry as a world leader in this field.

The Fresh Produce Safety Centre A-NZ (FPSC) is the industry-funded body that provides research, education and outreach on food safety matters. The FPSC has developed Guidelines for Fresh Produce Food Safety to support industry efforts to adopt food safety best practice. It conducts Professional Development Events and other activities to improve knowledge, skills and attitude. See www.freshproducesafety-anz.com

Q: Do you think everything is OK, or can the industry learn from this incident?

PMA A-NZ and FPSC support a review of this incident, and any similar case, because such a review may lead to improved food safety outcomes for Australian consumers. In particular, such a review should objectively test the capability of the food safety preventive controls in place, identify gaps in the effectiveness of the commercial and regulatory standards in place and clarify industry concerns relating to matters of fairness and equivalence.

Q: Where is the best place to go for specific information on hepatitis A virus and this outbreak?



Department of Health Victoria: [Chief Health Officer Alert and Frequently Asked Questions documents](#)

Food Standards Australis New Zealand: [Recall notice.](#)

Food Standards Australia New Zealand: [FSANZ advice on hepatitis A and imported ready-to-eat berries](#)

For further enquiries related to this Fact Sheet

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