

**Cracking the poison processed peanuts case**

Group called 'Team Diarrhea' helped track salmonella outbreak to plant  
**The Associated Press**  
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WASHINGTON - A century ago, at the dawn of food safety laws, inspection amounted to little more than opening a bin of flour and looking for something wiggly.

It's a different story now.

Solving the case of the poison processed peanuts took marathon work by federal scientists, clues in Canada, Oregon, Ohio and Connecticut, and a breakthrough in Minnesota at the hands of public health hotshots known as Team Diarrhea.

So labyrinthian has the nation's food production and distribution network become that a salmonella outbreak that has sickened 575 people in 43 states and resulted in the recall of more than 1,500 foods is traced to one plant making a mere 1 percent of the country's peanut products.



It's a far cry from 1906, year of the Pure Food and Drug Act, when Americans got most of their food from local farmers, grew some of their own and turned to processed products mainly for simple staples.

Those weren't necessarily the good old days. Shady operators packed sawdust and talcum into grains and sugar to add bulk. Toxic chemicals were used as preservatives. Much was foul and filthy before modern refrigeration and sanitation.

But when maggots munched in a sack of barley, it wasn't much of a mystery who let that happen.

In contrast, the peanut potboiler has posed a series of mysteries: a whatdunit, a whodunit, and the still-urgent question, where did it all go? Now the government has added another layer of intrigue to one of the largest recalls in history. It's accused the peanut plant of shipping products the company knew had tested positive for salmonella.

**The whatdunit**

A chain of events has to play out for the feds to discover an outbreak of foodborne illness. Sick people have to go to the doctor. The doctor must order tests. The lab must perform the tests correctly, then report the results to state or local authorities who must tell the federal government.

Then the real detective work begins.

The peanut case quickened the pulse of federal scientists on Nov. 12, more than a month after people started getting sick, when the federal Centers for Disease Control detected a cluster of salmonella cultures with an unusual genetic fingerprint reported from 12 states.

That was "a blinking light," Dr. Ali Khan, assistant surgeon general, told Congress.

PulseNet, a national network for finding patterns in widely dispersed foodborne bacterial illness, offered additional clues when four more states reported the cluster.

Then on Dec. 2, scientists began examining a second salmonella cluster with a similar genetic makeup, reported from 17 states. The two clusters turned out to be the same.

"December is when the alarm bells go off," Kahn said.

To solve a whatdunit, public health officials need to know what type of salmonella has caused an outbreak and what food is carrying it. There are more than 2,500 kinds of salmonella, each divided into subtypes.

For a while, chicken was suspected, as well as peanut butter.

Enter Team Diarrhea.

Last year, aggressive gumshoe work by Minnesota health officials helped pinpoint hot peppers as the source of a national salmonella outbreak wrongly blamed on tomatoes.

Investigating the new outbreak, they discovered in late December that some of the patients they interviewed lived or had eaten at one of three places — a nursing home, another long-term care institution and an elementary school.

Those places shared a food distributor in North Dakota. And they had only one product in common on their shelves — an Ohio brand of peanut butter sold to institutions.

That was one eureka moment. More would come.

Minnesota officials subsequently found salmonella in an opened five-pound container of peanut butter at the nursing home. It turned out to be the same strain as the one in the outbreak.

Not everything was falling into place. The peanut butter could have been tainted at the nursing home after it was opened. Not all victims in the country had eaten at an institution. Indeed, some hadn't eaten peanut butter at all out of a jar.

Gabrielle Meunier, whose 7-year-old son Christopher spent nights in the hospital sick from the outbreak in Vermont, told lawmakers the mystery poison might have been identified much sooner if the government had a secure Web site where victims could communicate with each other.

"Had I had an opportunity to talk to other mothers whose children were sick, and compare what they had eaten, I have no doubt we could have cracked this case back in early December," she said.

The inevitable delay between someone's illness and its reporting to the feds meant that no one had an up-to-date picture at any one time.

As Kahn put it: "I look at this as akin to driving while looking at the rear view mirror."

Still, the outbreak strain of salmonella typhimurium had been identified and peanuts were known to be the culprit in some way.

Leads were taking federal officials and their state counterparts across the country ever closer to the source. Only by knowing who caused this could it be stopped.

### **The whodunit**

The tainted peanut butter found in Minnesota carried the King Nut label and that company was quickly investigated by the Food and Drug Administration, as were other suppliers to institutions. King Nut issued a precautionary recall.

This trail also led farther back to the plant that supplied the peanut butter to King Nut — the Blakely, Ga., operation of Peanut Corp. of America. An initial round of recalls was announced by Peanut Corp. The company's products leave the plant in containers of up to 1,700 pounds for peanut butter, and 35 pounds to entire tanker trucks for its peanut paste.

Those supplies go to hundreds of companies for reprocessing as ingredients in well over 1,000 foods.

In mid-January officials in Connecticut found the outbreak strain in a previously unopened jar of King Nut peanut butter, made by the Blakely plant. Federal officials say this was the first strong indication that the peanut butter was contaminated before it left the plant.

How to explain the fact that some victims hadn't eaten peanut butter in a school, at a nursing home or out of a jar at all?

Scientists were looking hard at that question. First, they determined that many victims had eaten other products containing peanut butter as an ingredient.

Then they focused on two brands of prepackaged peanut butter crackers. Both were made at one plant, and that plant had been supplied with paste by the Peanut Corp. operation.

Now the investigation had crossed borders. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency retrieved intact packages of crackers from a patient in Canada who had bought them in the U.S. A test found the outbreak strain of salmonella in the crackers.

Three more intact packages bought by a victim in Oregon were tested, too, and found to be contaminated.

One mystery solved. And rapidly unfolding events at the Blakely plant would soon settle the whodunnit.

The FDA said its inspection, ending Jan. 27, found two salmonella strains at the plant. Although different from the outbreak strain, the discovery was telling. So was the observation of roaches, mold, a leaking roof and other sanitation problems.

The government, which says the outbreak might have contributed to eight deaths, has started a criminal investigation. The company denies any wrongdoing.

### **Where it went**

As well as tracing the contamination back to the source, officials have to follow serpentine trails forward to try to figure out all the final destinations. The list of recalls, and possibilities, keeps growing.

Recalls now include cookies, crackers, cereal, candy, ice cream, pet treats and much more.

In addition to having its products spread through the marketplace, Peanut Corp. has been a supplier to the government.

Federal officials said Friday they are shipping 660,000 new emergency meal kits to Arkansas and Kentucky after discovering many packages they sent earlier, to help people recover from an ice storm, contained the recalled peanut butter.

The Agriculture Department said it had shipped some of the company's potentially contaminated peanut butter and peanuts to eight states, including school lunch programs in California, Minnesota and Idaho, in 2007. The department has suspended business with the company.

Also Friday the government said a closer examination of company records shows that in 2007, it shipped chopped peanuts after salmonella was confirmed by private lab tests. In other cases, officials said, the company sold products that had tested positive without waiting to receive a second round of testing that eventually came back negative.

That raised another question about Peanut Corp. executives, one familiar to Washington from its own history of political scandal: What did they know and when did they know it?

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**Timeline: Salmonella outbreak**

**Sept. 8 - Jan. 2**

Salmonella outbreak begins and spreads. Most people were sickened after Oct. 1.

**Dec. 21**

Shirley Mae Almer, 72, dies at a nursing home in Brainerd, Minn. At the time, the cause of her death was unknown.

**Jan. 8**

CDC announces it is collaborating with public health officials to investigate a salmonella outbreak in multiple states.

**Jan. 9**

Outbreak spreads to 42 states.

**Jan. 10**

King Nut Companies issues a **voluntary recall of peanut butter**.

**Jan. 12**

Outbreak spreads to 43 states.

**Jan. 13**

Health officials urge nursing homes, hospitals, schools, universities and restaurants to toss out King Nut brand peanut butter linked to the salmonella outbreak.

The CDC says the tainted peanut butter may have contributed to three deaths and 410 confirmed cases.

**Jan. 15**

Kellogg recalls peanut butter crackers.

**Jan. 16**

The FDA announces its investigators have traced the source of salmonella outbreak to a plant in Blakely, Ga., owned by Peanut Corporation of America.

**Jan. 20**

Number of those sickened by the illness climbs to 485.

A Vermont couple whose 7-year-old son became sick after eating peanut butter crackers files a lawsuit against Peanut Corporation of America.

**Jan. 23**

Trader Joe's, General Nutrition Centers Inc., Pet Smart and NutriSystem are among the retailers who recall peanut butter products. More than 125 items are recalled in all.

**Jan. 25**

Minnesota Department of Health reports **a woman in her 80s has died of salmonella**, bringing the total number of reported deaths to seven.

**Jan. 26**

Relatives of Shirley Mae Almer, the 72-year-old

who died of salmonella on Dec. 21, sue the operators of Peanut Corporation of America.

#### **Jan. 27**

Federal health officials announce [the Peanut Corporation of America has a history of problems](#), and had shipped products in the past that the companies own tests had found positive for salmonella.

#### **Jan. 28**

PCA voluntarily recalls all peanuts and peanut products processed in its Blakely, Ga., plant since Jan. 1, 2007. The expanded recall includes all dry- and oil-roasted peanuts, granulated peanuts, peanut meal, peanut butter and peanut paste. The company stops producing all peanut products at the Blakely plant.

As of 9 p.m. EDT, 529 persons infected with salmonella typhimurium are reported from 43 states, according to the CDC. Additionally, one ill person is reported from Canada.

At least 431 peanut butter-containing products are recalled by 54 companies using ingredients produced by the PCA facility after July 1, 2008.

#### **Jan. 29**

A combination of epidemiological analysis and laboratory testing by state officials in Minnesota and Connecticut, the FDA, and the CDC enable the FDA to confirm that the sources of the salmonella outbreak are peanut butter and peanut paste produced by the PCA at its Blakely, Ga., processing plant.

The Ohio Department of Health says two containers of peanut butter taken from a central Ohio nursing home have tested positive for salmonella.

#### **Jan. 30**

Stephen Sundlof, head of the FDA's food safety center, says the Justice Department will investigate possible criminal violations by the PCA processing plant, assisted by FDA investigators.

#### **Feb. 2**

President Barack Obama promises a comprehensive review of the FDA. The salmonella outbreak prompts voluntary recalls by makers of more than 800 products. The recalls reach into Canada and Europe.

According to the CDC, 550 cases in 43 states are tallied, with the most recent reported illness beginning on Jan. 17, 2009.

#### **Feb. 3**

The Associated Press learns that a peanut

processing plant in Plainview, Texas, run by the PCA has operated for years uninspected and unlicensed by government health officials.

**Feb. 5**

The U.S. Agriculture Department suspends PCA from participating in government contract programs for at least a year. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack removes Stewart Parnell, PCA president, from the USDA's Peanut Standards Board.

Federal officials say that nearly 168,000 emergency meal kits sent to Kentucky after an ice storm were recalled more than two weeks earlier.

According to the CDC, 575 cases are counted in 43 states with the most recent reported illness beginning on Jan. 22, 2009.

**Feb. 6**

The Agriculture Department says that it shipped possibly contaminated peanut butter and other foods to free school-lunch programs in California, Minnesota and Idaho in 2007 under a contract with PCA.

Corpus Christi Catholic School in Colorado Springs, Colo., closes early after a student is diagnosed with salmonella poisoning.

**Feb. 11**

Stewart Parnell, the owner of Peanut Corp. of America, refuses to testify at hearing.

Ohio officials report a salmonella-linked death, bringing the death toll to 9.

**Feb. 12**

The Texas Department of State Health Services orders a recall of all products ever shipped from the now-closed Peanut Corp. of America plant in Plainview.

The agency says "dead rodents, rodent excrement and bird feathers" were discovered near a production area in the facility.

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