

Spinach: What you should know

By Robin Mather Jenkins
and Phil Vettel
Tribune staff reporters

The outbreak of *E. coli* from fresh spinach spread Monday, reaching 21 states including Illinois, and consumers faced growing questions over how to keep themselves safe. There is *E. coli* bacteria everywhere, but the O157:H7 strain found last week can cause lethal health problems, especially for the very young or elderly.

Some questions and answers:

Q. *The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration recommend discarding bagged salad mixes that contain spinach, and not eating fresh spinach in its raw state for now. Is cooked spinach safe?*

A. According to Tom Skinner, a CDC spokesman in Atlanta, fresh spinach should not be consumed raw. "We think that cooking to 160 degrees for 15 seconds will do what needs to be done to make it safe, but that's 160 degrees all the way through and it's hard to take the temperature of a leaf of spinach. For now, use frozen packaged spinach and cook it as directed." Microwaving can't guarantee a safe temperature.

Q. *Will washing take away the *E. coli*?*

A. "This is a very hardy bacteria," Skinner says. "Thoroughly washing fresh produce is always a good thing to do, but cook it properly too."

Q. *So *E. coli* isn't just dangerous in meat or dairy products?*

A. "These outbreaks are usually associated with undercooked meat, but we have seen a number of outbreaks related to produce," Skinner says.

Q. *What other type of produce poses an *E. coli* risk?*

A. Any produce that is irrigated. "It's not the produce itself, it's how it's grown, harvested and packed," Skinner says.

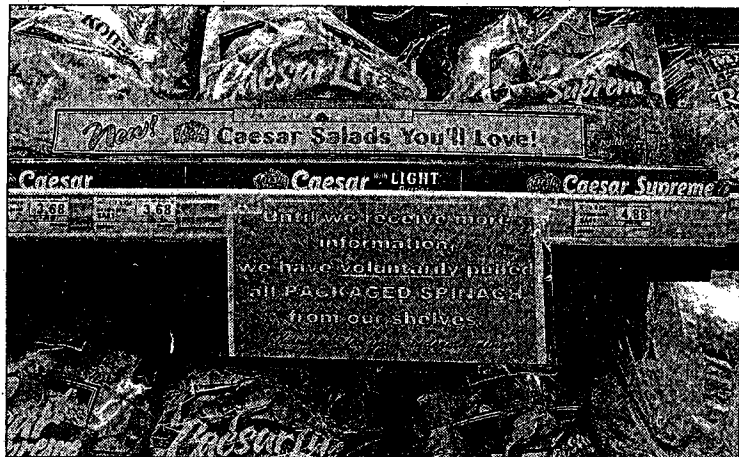
Q. *Does the spinach scare affect the availability of cooked-spinach dishes, such as creamed spinach, in restaurants?*

A. Because thoroughly cooking the spinach kills any harmful bacteria, properly cooked creamed spinach

SECTION 1 CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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Getty Images photo by Justin Sullivan

At United Market in San Rafael, Calif., a sign alerts customers that all bagged spinach had been pulled from produce shelves.

SPINACH: Restaurants offering alternatives

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

should not pose a risk. But the reality is that even a slight risk is too much for most restaurants. "I had to get rid of 20 cases [of spinach]," said Victor Martinez, chef at Shula's Steakhouse (301 E. North Water St.), which ordinarily serves creamed spinach. "With the scare that's out there right now, we just took it off the menu."

Q. *So nobody is touching spinach?*

A. Remarkably, at Gene & Georgetti (500 N. Franklin St.), creamed spinach remains on the menu. "The spinach we use is frozen, but I checked with my purveyor immediately anyway," said general manager Rich Ciota. "So we haven't made any adjustments yet." In fact, the restaurant offered cream of spinach soup during lunch on Monday and sold "about 20" orders, according to Ciota. "People asked, 'How can you offer this?' and I told them, 'Because I'm confident in our product.'"

Q. *Does the crisis mean I can't have spinach pizza?*

A. Good luck finding any. At Bacino's, where the heart-healthy pizza of spinach and low-fat cheese is the pizzeria's biggest seller, co-owner Linda Bacin has stopped using spin-

ach. "We pulled anything that had spinach in any way, shape or form," she said. "Even our frozen spinach, which comes from Idaho and isn't targeted as tainted. But we didn't want to take any chances." Bacin said that a number of customers last weekend switched to broccoli pizza. Don't knock it 'til you've tried it.

Q. *Are there other spinach substitutes being used?*

A. At the Chicago Chop House (60 W. Ontario St.), chef Bill Farrahi is substituting chicory for spinach in oysters Rockefeller. Bandera (535 N. Michigan Ave.) is using Swiss chard instead of spinach in its spinach enchiladas. Keefe's (20 W. Kinzie St.) has dropped any dish containing spinach, so the tomato-spinach ravioli is now a wild-mushroom ravioli, and the restaurant is pushing other vegetables, such as green beans, which come from the same Illinois farmer that supplies the restaurant with heirloom tomatoes. "They pick them that morning," co-owner Rich Keefer said, "and we serve them that night."

Q. *Are people going crazy without spinach on the menu?*

A. "Customers have been really understanding," said Bridget Morrey, day manager at Ina's (1235 W. Randolph St.), where the spinach frittata no longer contains any spinach and the salad menu has been rewritten. But at Bacino's, one Friday-night regular was so desperate for her spinach-pizza fix that she offered to sign a liability waiver. The restaurant refused.

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MORE INSIDE

■ 114

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PAGE 17

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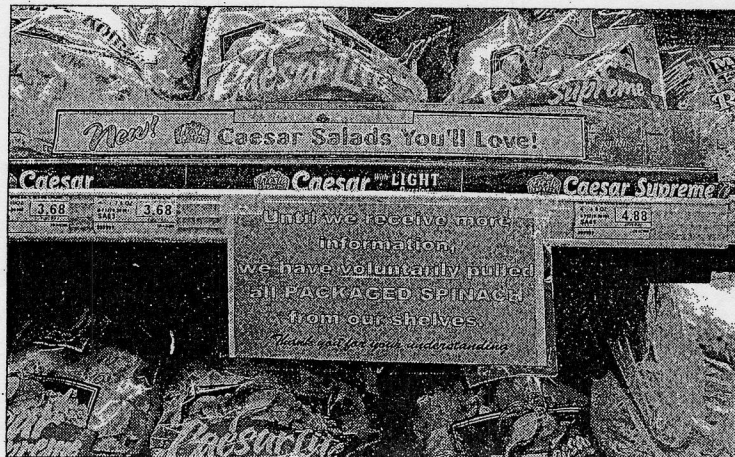
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