

WELLBEING

EHEC

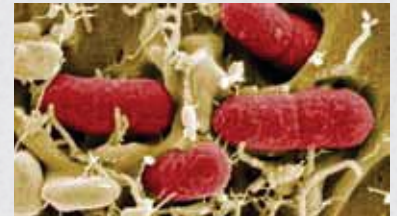
Food safety: Overcoming emotional reactions

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While the EHEC crisis of 2011 caused no fatalities in the Netherlands, it generated a veritable tsunami of negative media reports. The risks of microbial contamination were widely discussed while the disadvantages for human health of not consuming fresh vegetables were hardly given any attention. Communication about and trust in the product are crucial.



Food and traffic safety are similar in the sense that one hundred per cent safety can never be guaranteed. While the fresh chain has developed a regulatory system for restricting health risks to an acceptable minimum, food safety remains loaded with emotion and the media are eager to report on allegedly unsafe food.



The dynamics of the EHEC crisis surprised all parties in the chain. A thorough evaluation showed that an exceptional combination of factors had led to the EHEC outbreak, which resulted in about 50 deaths, mainly in Germany. GLOBAL-GAP certificates could not prevent consumers from losing their faith in fresh produce for some time, which led to the destruction of lots of healthy food and a prolonged period of low prices for primary producers.

Communication

Even though several independent research institutes identified the contamination route via various indirect evidence, the damage to the trust in fresh produce had already been done. Although the current certificates remain important, they were found to offer no protection against such a unique infestation, nor against the corresponding effect on consumers and the chain. The role of acknowledged scientific agencies that can inform consumers with authority via the media is very important in times of crisis in the field of food safety. The chain needs such figureheads.

Food safety is widely considered as a shared responsibility of all chain partners. Sterile cultivation of vegetables is not generally considered as an option to improve consumer trust. Some stakeholders consider communication about food safety as an opportunity for Dutch products whereas others question the usefulness of national promotion, arguing that consumers want safe chains rather than safe countries.

Basis for trust

In the current context, with food safety technically at its highest level ever, any media hype that damages trust in products can be a real problem. This makes the maintenance of the bond of confidence between chain and consumer important. In this context, a cast-iron technical guarantee of food safety is an absolute minimum requirement demanded for all products.

Partners in this seminar: Dutch Product Board, CLM (Centre for Agriculture and Environment), Horticoop, FresQ, FrugiVenta, St. Natuur en Milieu, RIVM, Voedingscentrum, Wageningen UR Greenhouse Horticulture