

**International Food Information Council Public Comments to the Food Safety and Inspection Service Meeting: Food Safety: Consumer Outreach and Education Today and for the Future**

TO: Paul Kiecker

Administrator of Food Safety and Inspection Service, Office of the Administrator (OA)  
Food Safety and Inspection Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
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RE: IFIC Public Comments to the Food Safety and Inspection Service Meeting: Food Safety: Consumer Outreach and Education Today and for the Future [Docket FSIS-2020-0026]

The [International Food Information Council \(IFIC\)](#) appreciates the opportunity to submit public comments to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), with the aims of contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how consumers handle and prepare food and developing an effective approach for consumer food safety education and outreach.

IFIC is a §501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization with a mission to effectively communicate science-based information about food safety, nutrition and agriculture. One of IFIC's objectives is to elevate the understanding of Americans' eating habits through consumer research. IFIC has been exploring Americans' attitudes toward food safety for decades and views consumer research as a critical first step in determining consumer understanding of food safety and examining how knowledge, perceptions and attitudes can impact behavior. IFIC's signature research effort is its annual [Food and Health Survey](#), an online survey of over 1000 Americans ages 18 to 80, now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year. IFIC also frequently conducts consumer research that offers insights on a range of specific food-related topics. These research endeavors not only assist in helping to understand consumer perceptions, but they also support the development of education strategies that can be used via digital and traditional platforms to bridge knowledge gaps for consumers.

IFIC values its past collaboration with FSIS and food safety partners to establish habitual consumer food handling practices and introduce education resources to improve consumer safety. Since the late 1990s, IFIC has conducted consumer research to help establish a baseline of knowledge on a range of safe food handling topics, several of which have been critical to the success of various Federally-led food safety education programs initiated and implemented by FSIS and its food safety education partners. Briefly, a few examples include:

- **[“Physicians Attitudes toward Food Safety Education” \(2000\)](#)**: the first and only physician-focused study to assess health professional responses to food safety issues. This research by IFIC, coupled with FSIS focus groups of pregnant women discussing listeriosis, yielded the development and dissemination of over 100,000 fact sheets on “Listeriosis and Pregnancy” to allied health professional groups and the public.
- **[“Cook it Safe” microwave safety campaign \(2011-2013\)](#)**: addressed the need for public education on microwave safety. This campaign was spurred on in part by findings from IFIC's [2008 Food and Health Survey](#), which demonstrated a low level of safe food handling practices when using a microwave for cooking. It was supported via a public-private partnership with the Partnership for Food Safety Education and a host of stakeholders including IFIC, FSIS, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Frozen Food Institute (AFFI) and the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers (AHAM). Recommendations made by the task force led to the visual indication of microwave wattage on all newly purchased microwaves.
- **FSIS Food and Health Survey questions**: Throughout the 2000s, IFIC continued to host questions about safe food handling for FSIS in our annual *Food and Health Surveys*, using these data to illustrate various trends and gaps in consumer food safety education and awareness.

IFIC is committed to remaining a credible, informative partner to FSIS in consumer food safety education. As such, we urge FSIS to 1) consider the results of IFIC’s recent consumer research on food production safety and safe food handling practices, detailed below, as part of its efforts to expand consumer education in this critical area; and 2) give special attention to specific sub-populations who stand to receive particular benefit from information on how to keep food safe for themselves and those they care for.

IFIC’s [2020 Food and Health Survey](#),<sup>1</sup> fielded in April 2020, found that even in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, 67% of consumers were somewhat or very confident in the safety of the U.S. food supply. This number has held steady over recent years. At the same time, specific concerns about food safety remain. Generally, these have been consistent from year to year, with the top issue being foodborne illness in bacteria, followed by chemicals in food and carcinogens in food. However, while these options still remained important for many, this year they were overshadowed by a new addition: “Food handling/food preparation related to risk of COVID-19”, which was listed as the primary food safety issue for 24% of survey takers. Further, consumers were much more concerned about food safety when eating food prepared outside the home as compared to when preparing meals at home, though nearly one-third (30%) of survey participants were at least somewhat concerned about the latter.

To take a deeper look into consumer food handling behaviors and learn more about their current food safety concerns, IFIC conducted another survey ( $n=1000$ ) specific to these issues: “[Trends, Habits and Attitudes Related to Food Safety](#)”<sup>2</sup> was fielded in July 2020 and publicly released in September 2020. Key findings included:

- **Nearly half are concerned about food safety when preparing food at home; coronavirus exposure and food contamination are among the most common food safety worries.** Forty-nine percent of survey participants said they were at least somewhat concerned about the safety of their food when preparing food at home (24% very concerned; 25% somewhat concerned). Common concerns included exposure to the coronavirus – consistent with the results of the *2020 Food and Health Survey* – as well as food contamination, personal or family health, bacteria and sanitation. Men, African American people and people under the age of 45 were more likely to be very concerned, while women, white people and those older than 65 were less likely to share that level of concern.
- **There is a greater sense of control over food safety when eating food made at home compared with food made outside the home, but concerns about home food preparation remain.** Sixty-six percent said that they feel they can always control the safety of their food when eating food made at home; just 17% said the same about foods prepared outside the home. However, concern remains about specific food-safety issues related to home food preparation, including contamination, safe cooking techniques and allergens. Nearly half of survey takers were very concerned about food becoming contaminated (46%), food poisoning or foodborne illness (45%), and meat being cooked to a safe internal temperature (45%). Thirty-nine percent said they were very concerned about the presence of allergens.
- **Washing hands and cleaning cutting boards are the top food-safety actions taken when making food.** Nearly three in four (73%) said they wash their hands and 65% said they wash cutting boards when cooking or preparing food. However, only 49% said they use a different or freshly cleaned cutting board for each product (such as raw meat and produce). Fewer than one in three (32%) said they use a food thermometer to check the doneness of meat and poultry. Again, there were differences between gender, race and age in this question: men, African American people and those under 45—the same groups that were more likely to be very concerned about food safety—were *less* likely to follow most of the food safety risk-minimizing actions.

These findings indicate widespread concern about food safety and significant room for improvement in the implementation of safe food handling and preparation practices, particularly among men, African

<sup>1</sup> International Food Information Council. *2020 Food & Health Survey*. 10 June 2020. <https://foodinsight.org/2020-food-and-health-survey/>

<sup>2</sup> International Food Information Council. *Trends, Habits and Attitudes Related to Food Safety*. 2 September 2020. <https://foodinsight.org/consumer-survey-a-second-look-at-covid-19s-impact-on-food-purchasing-eating-behaviors/>

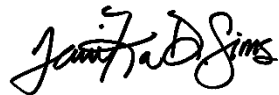
American and younger adults (< 45 years old). Thus, there is an opportunity for heightened communications among these subgroups to increase knowledge, understanding and uptake of food safety recommendations. Further, despite the best efforts of FSIS, FDA, IFIC and other non-governmental organizations, it is clear that worries remain about risk for COVID-19 as it relates to food handling and food preparation. Sustained efforts to provide the best available information on this issue should be an important focus as we continue to feel the effects of the ongoing pandemic.

Over the past several decades, IFIC's consumer insights have helped FSIS, non-governmental organizations and the private sector tailor food safety education and messages so that the public can better understand how to minimize the consequences of improper food handling. One reality that has become increasingly clear over this span of time is this: with so many sources of food information available today, it is critical that guidelines for safe food handling and preparation are communicated in ways that effectively reach consumers. Communication and education efforts should encompass methods that recognize the diversity of both the citizens of the United States and the platforms from which they receive information. IFIC looks forward to future opportunities to collaborate with FSIS to better understand how to elevate effective food safety practices that keep Americans safe and healthy.

Sincerely,



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