



Tracking Cyclospora: Food Safety, Outbreak Response, and Policy Reform

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Cyclospora cayetanensis is a foodborne parasite causing a major stomach illness outbreak across the US, heavily linked to contaminated lettuce and salad greens. Record case numbers have exposed large gaps in how federal and state health agencies track and prioritize food safety. This brief analyzes the current government response, evaluates safety steps, and offers policy solutions to improve future food tracking and outbreaks.

Keywords — *Cyclospora cayetanensis*, foodborne illness, preventive health, food safety, outbreak, FDA, CDC

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On July 17, 2026, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that a cyclosporiasis outbreak was linked to shredded iceberg lettuce served at Taco Bell locations in 5 states. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) identified a single supplier, Taylor Farms de Mexico, as the source of the lettuce used at the Taco Bell locations. Taylor Farms de Mexico has since removed and recalled all products with iceberg lettuce from Central Mexico. This outbreak has provided insight into how foodborne diseases spread and how to mitigate them.

A. What is Cyclosporiasis?

Cyclosporiasis is an intestinal infection caused by the parasite *Cyclospora cayetanensis*.

Cyclosporiasis is spread through the fecal-oral route by consuming produce or fruit containing the parasite. Often, the produce gets contaminated contacting water or soil with *Cyclospora*.

Major symptoms of cyclosporiasis include watery diarrhea, loss of appetite, fatigue, and fever. However, some people who have the disease do not present with any symptoms. Cyclosporiasis can lead to loss of fluids, causing severe dehydration and electrolyte imbalance. With treatment like antibiotics, antidiarrheal medications, and hydration, most people recover after 1–2 weeks. Without treatment, symptoms may persist for a month or longer. Cyclosporiasis may also be more severe in people with weak immune systems.

Cyclosporiasis is not common in the United States. Outbreaks occur more often in tropical or subtropical areas, as well as regions without strong water treatment systems. Countries in South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa are more likely to be affected; however, U.S. outbreaks are still possible.

B. Recent Outbreak Details and Tracking

From June 22, 2026, to July 20, 2026, the CDC reported that there have been 1,947 people infected with *Cyclospora* and at least 98 hospitalizations from this particular outbreak. Officials traced the outbreak back to Taylor Farms de Mexico by looking at cases who ate at Taco Bell and performing ingredient level analyses on their meals. 90% of interviewed cases reported iceberg lettuce.

Cyclosporiasis is a nationally notifiable disease and can be reported in 47 states, meaning that state and local health departments in these states collect data on cyclosporiasis cases and send them to the CDC. These state and local health departments receive case reports from clinicians and laboratories and perform investigations through questionnaires, patient interviews, stool specimens, and laboratory testing. The CDC also works with the FDA and other agencies to utilize food traceback information through the supply chain to eventually identify a single food source.

Cyclospora is more difficult to track than bacteria because the incubation period is longer than usual, about 1 week, making it difficult for people to remember what they ate. Additionally, officials are not able to conduct whole genomic sequencing on *Cyclospora* due to the genome's enormous size. Instead, they target eight specific markers on stool samples with genetic testing, facilitating the traceback process.

Cyclospora only reproduces in the small intestine and cannot be grown in a lab. *Cyclospora* also reproduces sexually, unlike bacteria, so samples are not genetically identical. These two factors make the parasite harder to analyze.

C. History of Cyclosporiasis

The first human cases of *Cyclospora* were discovered in 1977 and 1978 in Papua New Guinea. However, it was incorrectly identified as a species of *Isospora*, another coccidian parasite. In 1993, the parasite was officially classified as *Cyclospora cayetanensis*.

The first major outbreak of cyclosporiasis in the United States occurred in the spring of 1996. 1465 cases were reported from May to August in the U.S. and Canada. Studies conducted in New York and Florida traced the outbreak to raspberries exported from Guatemala. A Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point system was implemented by the Guatemalan Berry Commission to address the issue.

In 2018, multiple multistate outbreaks of cyclosporiasis occurred in the United States. One outbreak in June was traced back to Del Monte vegetable trays, where 212 cases were reported, and 7 people were hospitalized by July 2018. Another outbreak in July was linked to McDonald's salads provided by the supplier Fresh Express, where 395 cases were reported, and 16 people were hospitalized by August 2018. Both companies recalled their products, and McDonald's switched their salad supplier.

D. History of Food Safety and Tracking

Before the 1900s, the food industry was dangerous, with compounds like formaldehyde and borax being included in products. Several events changed this, one being the experiments that Harvey Washington Wiley, chief chemist of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), performed in 1883. He recruited volunteers at the USDA to receive three free meals each day containing suspected toxic compounds without eating anything else. Wiley successfully proved that some compounds were dangerous.

Another catalyst was *The Jungle*, a novel written by Upton Sinclair in 1906, that discusses the unsanitary meat-packing practices in the United States. Sinclair revealed the oppressive conditions workers faced in meatpacking plants and the revolting nature of what Americans were actually eating. Sinclair showed how food manufacturing companies would allow anything to maximize profits.

The Jungle spurred the pure food movement, where journalists exposed unsafe food packaging practices, and people protested for safety regulations. The same year that Sinclair published his book, the Pure Food and Drug Act was passed, which created the FDA and banned misbranded or adulterated food products in interstate commerce.

Historically, health inspectors used multiple strategies to isolate outbreaks, including asking hospitals and laboratories for information, using media sources like radio and newspapers, reviewing guest books or credit card receipts, and interviewing patients. Famously, in 1854, Dr. John Snow used maps and birth and death registries to identify a local water pump as the source of a severe cholera outbreak.

In the modern day, scientists use DNA fingerprinting on bacteria, surveillance reports, epidemic curves, and standard questionnaires. Tools like PulseNet, a national pathogen DNA network, and the National Hypothesis Generating Questionnaire, a questionnaire that collects the same information across multiple states, helps investigators identify a source quickly and efficiently.

II. EPIDEMIOLOGICAL & CLINICAL OVERVIEW

To fully grasp the reasons behind the stomach illness outbreak across the US, we must

first understand the *Cyclospora* parasite itself. The *Cyclospora* parasite is usually carried in human faeces; thus, it contaminates agricultural water or fresh produce in unsanitary conditions when human faeces come into contact with agricultural infrastructure, under overly lax food safety regulations and inspection requirements. Though the life cycle of the *Cyclospora* parasite is not completely understood, it is hypothesised to be as follows: The *Cyclospora* parasite contains two ovoid sporocysts, with each sporulated oocyst containing four sporozoites. Unsporulated oocysts are first excreted in human faeces, and sporulation occurs in the days or weeks after at room temperature. The sporulated oocysts can then contaminate fresh produce and water, which are then ingested, and in the gastrointestinal tract, the oocysts excyst, freeing the sporozoites, which invade the epithelial cells of the small intestine, lastly infecting the host human and causing Cyclosporiasis. It must be noted that the parasite excreted by humans is not infectious initially; rather it becomes infectious after sporulation, at which point it can start to contaminate food and water.

Cyclosporiasis has a range of symptoms, with the most common being watery and/or bloody faeces. Other symptoms may also be observed, such as abdominal pain, nausea, fatigue, and even low-grade fevers. However, it is often misdiagnosed as a bacterial infection for various reasons. Firstly, Cyclosporiasis symptoms are practically indistinguishable from common bacterial foodborne pathogens, such as *Salmonella*. As these symptoms of watery faeces and abdominal pain resemble bacterial or viral gastroenteritis, no further tests are usually conducted to further understand the patient's sickness. Next, standard tests usually are not enough to find *Cyclospora cayetanensis* due to its small size, leading it to become overlooked. Laboratories must use specialised methods such as

molecular testing or specialised staining to detect the parasite. Lastly, as shedding of *Cyclospora* oocysts is often low-level, simply testing stool samples may result in a false negative result. Overall, the unique characteristics of the *Cyclospora* parasite makes it incredibly hard to properly detect and diagnose patients with Cyclosporiasis.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of dealing with Cyclosporiasis lies in the difficulty in neutralising its parasitic threat in fresh produce. Standard habits such as washing lettuce or buying organic foods are ineffective in combatting the *Cyclospora* parasite because of its structure. The hard, sticky shell of the oocyst means that rinsing fresh produce under running water may not be useful, as the oocyst clings tightly to the produce, and its rigid, antimicrobial nature means that it is resistant to most standard chemical treatments. Additionally, though organic farms restrict the synthetic or chemical input into its products, organic farming does not have any special implications for sanitation standards, exposing organic products to the same risk of contamination as normal ones. The *Cyclospora* parasite infects plants through contaminated water or unhygienic harvesting conditions, and is a biological parasite, not the chemical products that organic farms avoid using, meaning that organic products are just as easily contaminated by the parasite as normal farm products. The only way to destroy the parasite is through heat, by breaking the tough oocyst wall; hence most Cyclosporiasis outbreaks have almost exclusively had to do with raw produce.

III. REGULATORY MITIGATION

The FDA published FSMA 204 (Food Traceability Rule) in 2022, requiring “persons who manufacture, process, pack, or hold food on FDA’s Food Traceability List” to increase critical

communication within the whole food supply chain. They outline that they must share “key data elements” and “critical tracking events” with their supply chain partners, with the goal of being able to pinpoint, track, and identify contamination of food within the system. While the rule was published in 2022, the deadline for compliance wasn’t until January 20, 2026. This was to allow the FDA to work with and support the multitude of businesses across the supply chain to overcome the massive technological and operation hurdles of these regulations. Due to these realities, along with the many voiced concerns from many entities in the supply chain, the compliance date was extended to July 20, 2028. The current *Cyclospora* cayetanensis outbreak may have been prolonged due to the delayed enforcement of FSMA 204, since supply chain entities were not required to maintain digital, standardized tracking data. This ultimately slowed down the identification of its source and consequently delayed recalls, resulting in a broader outbreak.

Currently, federal agencies such as the FDA and CDC are actively tracking the outbreak. They have successfully identified subclusters and are continuing to track and identify others outside of that one. The CDC is documenting and reporting locations of cases, while the FDA has coordinated a voluntary recall notice with Taylor Farms De Mexico regarding iceberg lettuce distributed through Taco Bell locations. While the FDA possesses mandatory recall authority under FSMA law, they prioritize working with companies to execute recalls voluntarily because they can rely on cooperation. In contrast, enforcing a mandatory recall involves many administrative hurdles delaying the whole process meaning forced recalls generally move slower than voluntary ones, which is critical during a public health emergency.

The slowed response to this outbreak is a reflection of current gaps in data between state health departments, with the delayed enforcement of FSMA exacerbating that delayed response. Currently, data remains isolated because local health departments and entities in the food supply chain rely on incompatible tracking systems that don't easily integrate with the FDA's databases, or they may lack the access to this technology or ways to sustainably monitor and maintain it completely. There have also been recent budget cuts, along with the historic lack of funding slowing down research on these diseases and affecting tracing efforts. Furthermore, the FDA has explicitly emphasized that tracking data in small, isolated pieces with just individual entities does not work, and that the system requires a full end-to-end integration of tracking data across the complex supply chains. Because FSMA isn't yet fully enforced, quick tracking in the event of an outbreak such as this one becomes exponentially more difficult to do efficiently, leaving much of the work to less-coordinated, state level efforts. These factors contribute heavily to the administrative delays that prolong the outbreak.

IV. CONSUMER SAFETY & PREVENTIVE HEALTH

Although completely eradicating the risk of contaminating the *Cyclospora* infection is not a possibility, there are several food handling techniques that consumers can take to reduce the risk. Fresh produce should be rinsed under clean, running water, regardless of labels claiming the product to be "pre-washed". Items such as cucumbers, melons, and root vegetables must be firmly washed with a clean produce brush prior to slicing to avoid the possibility of your knife dragging surface germs inside. Additionally, avoiding chemical washes and discarding outer layers are steps that can be taken prior to consuming produce in order to avoid contamination. In order to further reduce risk,

some safe dietary alternatives or cooking guidelines consist of consuming cooked vegetables and other foods that can be heated to at least 158°F (70°C), such as roasted or steamed vegetables, cooked potatoes, and thoroughly cooked meat or fish.

Consumers should particularly make a concerted effort to switch to whole heads of lettuce rather than pre-washed, bagged salad greens. Whole heads of lettuce provide consumers more control over food handling when rinsing under running water, as opposed to the commercial washing or rinsing that is carried out by companies that sell prewashed salad greens. The FDA has especially linked iceberg lettuce to increased risk of cyclosporiasis, and even stated that packaged lettuce products from Taylor Fresh Food should be "discarded immediately and not consumed".

If the disease is contracted, there are numerous ways to handle the symptoms. Unlike other viral stomach bugs, cyclosporiasis generally requires medical treatment to fully clear. Therefore, it is necessary to consult a doctor before attempting to take over the counter anti-diarrheal drugs, such as peramide or bismuth subsalicylate, because they may slow down suggestion which can in turn prolong the effect of the infection, or impact the results of diagnostic stool tests. The standard and most effective form of treatment is a 7- to 10-day course of trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (TMP-SMX), otherwise known as Bactrim, Septra, or Cotrim. However, in the case that you are allergic to sulfa drugs, prescriptions for alternative medications such as nitazoxanide or ciprofloxacin are probable, yet, less effective against the parasite. The recovery or illness duration for the infection typically ranges from a few days to a month, often characterized by a pattern of symptoms that clear and return. The

prolonged recovery period directly leads to difficulty in tracking the parasite due to the overlap of the long incubation window (ranging from 2 to 14 days), making it difficult for patients to correctly recollect what contaminated food they consumed weeks prior and, consequently, for investigators to identify the source of contamination.

V. STAKEHOLDERS & EARLY RESPONSES

Major food retailers and restaurant chains have responded with swiftness regarding the early warnings—although with different messaging—once regulators found a connection between the outbreak and lettuce. After CDC and FDA revealed in an announcement the underlying factor, shredded iceberg lettuce served at Taco Bell locations in five states, that contributed to the cyclosporiasis infections, Taco Bell said it voluntarily removed the suspected lettuce from affected restaurants and then switched suppliers across its system within days. At the same time, Taylor Farms de Mexico, the identified supplier, initiated a voluntary recall of all iceberg lettuce grown in its central Mexico facility and shipped to 27 states, covering both food-service product and Marketside-brand lettuce sold at Walmart—all with an emphasis that FDA has not confirmed positive *Cyclospora* tests on the recalled product and insisting it's behaving with “an abundance of caution”. Major distributors like Sysco have halted distribution of Taylor Farms iceberg lettuce from Mexico and highly encouraged customers to remove it, and large retailers followed FDA guidance to pull recalled products and offer refunds, even as some began quietly substituting other greens to reduce consumer anxiety.

Domestic lettuce growers, who are not directly implicated, are nevertheless absorbing the economic shock. Reporting from California and

other states reveals a split picture: some local farms and farm stands are seeing a surge in demand for clearly U.S.-grown or “local” lettuce, selling out earlier as shoppers try to avoid imported or pre-bagged salad mixes; others, especially large operations that rely on food-service contracts, are watching orders fall as restaurants simplify menus or pivot to alternative sides. Several California growers have reportedly skipped harvest and plowed mature lettuce crops back into the soil because buyers are concerned about any lettuce, which have caused immediate financial losses and fewer hours for seasonal farmworkers, even though federal officials have not linked U.S. fields to contamination. Farms with diversified crops can sometimes shift crews toward produce that consumers view as safer, but this reallocation is not perfect and leaves gaps in income and labor demand.

Local and health departments and community clinics are simultaneously dealing with the clinical side of the crisis. CDC surveillance and state bulletins reveal thousands of laboratory-confirmed cyclosporiasis cases and hundreds of hospitalizations across more than 40 states, with some—such as Kansas and Michigan—reporting sharp spikes that demand intensive case interviewing and coordination with FDA on traceback. Community clinics and urgent-care centers in these areas are seeing many patients with prolonged diarrhea, cramping, as well as fatigue, and clinicians note that *Cyclospora* often requires specialized stool testing that is not automatically run, so cases can be misdiagnosed as generic bacterial gastroenteritis before being correctly identified and reported. Local health agencies are pushing out advisories to both the public and providers—explaining which lettuce products have been recalled, urging people to discard them, and reminding clinicians to consider *Cyclospora* in summer diarrheal illnesses—while acknowledging that

under-diagnosis and testing delays make it hard to see the outbreak's full scale in real time.

VI. POTENTIAL POLICY SOLUTIONS

A. Congress

As this brief identifies considerable gaps in federal and state health agency tracking, it is also important to recognize the potential for policy solutions in these areas even amid public panic. One of the biggest dampers on the government's ability to safely track and prevent *Cyclospora cayetanensis* outbreaks is the 2028 enforcement delay on the FDA's Food Traceability Rule, containing an appropriations rider that currently blocks the agency from spending money to enforce compliance with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Traceability Rule that requires high-risk food suppliers to maintain precise digital records to shorten outbreak tracing times from weeks to days. According to Bloomberg Law News in 2026, "Citing industry cost concerns, compliance was initially pushed back, and Congress subsequently barred the FDA from enforcing the requirements until July 2028." Public health advocates and lawmakers claim that this delay significantly hinders the FDA from preventing public health risks for all food-borne illnesses. Specific actions that Congress can take to overturn this delay is by repealing or amending the specific budgetary rider and statutory language that currently prevents the FDA from using their funds to enforce this rule. If repealed, it would allow the FDA to crack down on FSMA and speed up tracking capabilities to prevent the outbreak from spreading further.

On federal Representative Josh Gottheimer's policy platform website, the New Jersey's fifth district voice announces new federal actions to combat *Cyclospora* in order to promote food safety. One portion of the site's article stands out: "In July 2025, the CDC also quietly

downgraded *Cyclospora* and five other pathogens from mandatory to "optional" tracking, meaning health officials are no longer required to actively monitor and report *Cyclospora* cases in the same way they were for almost 30 years." The biggest policy recommendation for Congress is to reinstate *Cyclospora* and the other five pathogens' places on the mandatory tracking list, therefore making every facet of illness documentation and outbreak prevention necessary and required of our government agencies and food bureaucracy. In doing this, it could make the policy recommendations of this brief even more enforceable and effective.

B. The FDA

According to Trustwell in 2026, a food safety organization, the FDA uses a specific risk-ranking model to evaluate microbial hazards, historical outbreak data, and the potential severity of the illness. This places vulnerable foods such as leafy greens, sprouts, and melons at the top of the compliance priority list. Currently, the FDA targets lettuce companies first by legally restricting the Traceability Rule requirements to the official Food Traceability List (FTL), essentially telling non-listed food companies they are exempt from specific rules for now. The government also uses many levers to enforce this rule, thereby compelling compliance. The FDA does not actively monitor live corporate software, but the law requires companies handling the FTL items to hand over an electronic and sortable spreadsheet of their tracking data within 24 hours of the initial request. Because manual paperwork would be harder to compile that quickly, lettuce companies are effectively forced to digitize their processes even for a simple audit. This makes tracking even easier as well as deeper, because companies are not only forced to digitize their outbreaks; they are required to digitize even minute processes.

C. Policy Recommendations

While bureaucratic food-process targeting is important, it is clear that the FDA and government public health agencies must be bolstered by further legislation and action in order to ensure that extreme outbreaks of food-borne illnesses become rare again. That could first be achieved by improving the details. Revising the Traceability Rule's current format flexibility, which currently allows various spreadsheet types to require a single, universal data standard, would force every farm and retailer to speak the same digital language. This could allow the FDA's algorithms to scan the entire lettuce supply chain without needing manual data reconciliation. Then, integrating this data directly into the FDA's PREDICT system, which is their automated import screening tool, would allow foreign lettuce imports to automatically be flagged or denied entry at the border if their digital data trail is missing or broken. This would protect domestic farmers by ensuring that international lettuce suppliers face the exact same high digital enforcement barrier to enter the U.S. market, while also protecting food safety for the public as a whole. Lastly, removing current exemptions for certain cooked, pre-packaged, or transformed leafy greens could expand the definition of lettuce to cover any product containing fresh or minimally processed leafy green components; this allows the scope of lettuce traceability to improve, closing loopholes for specific complex at-risk foods, such as multi-ingredient meal kits and processed salad bowls, that currently escape strict lot-level tracking.

In terms of penalties, rather than staying at current hypothetical penalty frameworks, the FDA could move to penalize companies that refuse to switch to digital tracking. Lawmakers could grant the FDA the authority to issue more

targeted, escalating penalties, such as digital non-compliance fines and immediate lot seizure. Imposing compounding daily fines for every day an FTL facility continues to log shipments using paper after the compliance deadline would incentivize as immediate as possible modernization, while granting field inspectors the power to immediately seize and destroy any commercial lettuce shipment that lacks a digitally verifiable Traceability Lot Code (TLC) would treat undocumented food as high-risk.

D. Company Frameworks

Major corporations such as Walmart and Kroger use the federal traceability rule as a benchmark for their own policies, as detailed in 2026 Walmart supplier and seller community article specified to the Cyclospora outbreak. They enforce stricter, private deadlines to lettuce suppliers while threatening to drop them from store shelves if they do not adopt digital barcode tracking immediately. Lawmakers can codify some of their tactics into federal law by using specific strategies, like leveraging the "no digital data, no entry" facet. Walmart has set a strict boundary for its leafy green suppliers, meaning that if a shipment does not arrive with a digital record, the distribution center doors stay closed and the shipment is rejected. Lawmakers could convert this into federal policy by legally prohibiting any commercial carrier from accepting or transporting FTL goods across state lines without an active and accessible digital record. In addition to standardizing the technology used nationally as well as implementing continuous auditing, taking advantage of these frameworks from Walmart and Kroger could improve food-borne safety nationally.

E. Small Farm Impact & Prevention

While penalties like those above are important, subsidies for smaller farms could prove to be effective in preventing food-borne illness while also bolstering smaller-business stakes in our food industry. Mega-retailers successfully forced compliance from larger corporate farms, yet smaller farms were frequently squeezed out because they could not afford the upfront software and scanning hardware costs; this was partially examined by a University of Arkansas research article. If national lawmakers enforce strict digital mandates, they must also prevent supply-chain monopolies. A potentially smart policy pairing could combine this with federal tax credits or hardware grants to help the small-scale farmers purchase the necessary digital tracking tools, as well as to have a more secure place in our food industry.

The current *Cyclospora cayetanensis* outbreak is a glaring reminder of the fallibility of public health regulation, tracking, and policy if it is not constantly examined and continuously enforced. While this brief has examined the current gaps in food safety regulation on a federal level, it has also determined that a straightforward, safe path to fixing these gaps can be possible. If lawmakers consider recommendations, if government agencies enforce regulations, if corporations track their suppliers closely, and if consumers properly evaluate risks, national food safety and public health can be protected.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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