

FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY: INFORMATION RELEASED UNDER THE
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT
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Request

The foods recall amongst big branded stores (Tesco, Morrisons, Asda, Sainsbury and Lidl) is becoming a regular occurrence nearly every other week and is on the increase. Under the Freedom of information, I would like to know what measures is the Food Standards Agency taking to address this issue?

Response

In total, the FSA was notified of and investigated 2,321 food, feed and environmental contamination incidents in the UK during the 2018/19 reporting year. This represents a small (0.2%) decrease in notifications when compared to 2017/18. Please note, we do not collect data on incident notifications specific to 'big branded stores', such as Tesco, Morrisons, ASDA, Lidl, Sainsburys, Marks and Spencer's, etc.

The current volume of food recalled only represents a tiny proportion of the millions of food products sold in the UK every day. The numbers of incident notifications received, and alerts issued, are only a measure of how many incidents the FSA has been made aware of. Therefore, these numbers are not indicative of a change in the food safety profile of the UK, but instead reflect the variability in incident type that we see from one year to the next. The rise in the number of alerts issued in recent years may be aligned to the increase in profile and reporting of risks associated with allergens. Subsequently, there is no evidence to suggest that the level of food safety in the UK has decreased.

It is the responsibility of food businesses to ensure that the food they produce, distribute, store and sell is safe, and to take appropriate action where food is found to be unsafe. The number of incidents and alerts recorded in any given year can be affected by many factors including new consumer trends and awareness, technological developments, legislative changes, the amount of testing carried out, and even the weather.

We continue to respond to these changes in numbers by continually reviewing capacity and capability. The FSA uses established plans and procedures to manage and prevent incidents, working with enforcement authorities and businesses to ensure consumers are protected.

Data on incidents is used first and foremost to investigate the issue at hand and inform actions necessary to protect public health. For example, data on the nature of the product, any contamination, quantities and distribution are used to inform the nature and extent of risk to public health, and the risk management actions necessary to protect public health in a proportionate manner. This is carried out in conjunction with the enforcement authority and affected business(es).

Longer term, the data may be used in incident reviews and upon analysis, enables us to trace trends and identify emerging incident causal factors within our 'Incident Assessment and Prevention' role; thereby, providing a better understanding of when, why and how food safety incidents occur. Alongside other bodies of work, this may help us identify best practice and work towards embedding this within industry/enforcement bodies.

The FSA and Food Standards Scotland (FSS) have worked in partnership with food businesses, enforcement authorities and consumer interest groups to strengthen the UK's food safety withdrawal and recall system, through the Efficacy of Recalls and Withdrawals project. A number of products to assist businesses meet their responsibilities have been developed and are now published. We published [Guidance on Food Traceability, Withdrawals and Recalls within the UK Food Industry](#) in March of this year. The guidance is designed to help food businesses carry out food safety withdrawals and recalls with greater ease and effectiveness. It explains what the law requires and how to comply, it also includes supporting tools such as editable allergy alert and food recall alert point of sale notices that businesses can use. The templates have been designed to ensure key information is communicated to consumers in a clear, eye catching and consistent manner. A Quick Reference Guide has also been developed to further assist businesses, and this complements the main guidance.

We have also developed tools to help businesses conduct root cause analysis (RCA) for all incident notifications that are reported to the FSA Incidents Team which result in the issuing of a recall notice (either an Allergy Alert or a Product Recall Information Notice); these learnings are shared. The RCA will allow food businesses to identify the initiating cause, in a causal chain, which led to the recall or allergen incident and additionally, the stage at which intervention could reasonably be implemented to mitigate risk and prevent future recurrence. The tools developed include an 'Introduction to Root Cause Analysis' e-learning course, a 'best practice' example of a completed RCA, and a Report Form that businesses can use to share RCA learnings with the FSA, via their competent authorities.