



# FOCUS on Field Epidemiology

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Conducting Traceback Investigations

1. Has a traceback investigation of a food item occurred recently in your department? If so, how “ideal” were the circumstances surrounding the investigation? Were there leftover food items to sample? If it occurred at a food service establishment, were the workers and management cooperative? Was the food item a packaged item, and if so, was the packaging still available? Did you look for receipts and records? Was a definitive cause of the outbreak discovered?
2. Besides food or food products, what other items can you think of that might cause an outbreak and require a traceback to find their source?

When conducting any investigation, circumstances are rarely ideal. Even if the outbreak occurred very recently, the food item in question may have been already discarded. Busy food service establishments may have many part-time workers, making it difficult to reconstruct the events that preceded the outbreak. Outbreaks related to school cafeterias or food items eaten predominantly by children tend to have “extra” pressure to find the cause quickly. Outbreaks occurring because of home-cooked food items may have fewer clues because of discarded packaging and difficulty in recalling purchase dates.

If no members of your group have conducted a traceback investigation, you might try searching the MMWR ([www.cdc.gov/mmwr/](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/)) on the terms “traceback” and “outbreak” and read a few short articles related to food items (one suggestion is Outbreak of Cyclosporiasis Associated with Snow Peas — Pennsylvania, 2004 [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5337a6.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5337a6.htm)). Try answering the discussion questions based on one of these reported outbreaks.

Food items or products are probably the most common cause of traceback investigations. The issue also mentioned medicines and cosmetics (see [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00043194.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00043194.htm) for an article describing the glycerin used to make a children’s acetaminophen syrup, and [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/wk/mm4529.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/wk/mm4529.pdf) for a report of mercury poisoning associated with beauty cream).

Additionally, blood products can be contaminated and imported animals can be sources of disease (see [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5224a1.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5224a1.htm) for a discussion of a multi-state outbreak of monkey-pox).



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