

FSIS Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS) Complaints Annual Report – Calender Year (CY) 2017

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Introduction/Background

What is the FSIS Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS)?

The Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS) was established in November 2001 to provide FSIS a centralized system for managing consumer complaints associated with FSIS-regulated meat, poultry, and processed egg products. CCMS and the consumer complaints collected in the system provide an additional data source that supports FSIS’s real-time surveillance and response activities, enables the Agency to identify and investigate reports of potentially unsafe food in commerce, and to evaluate trends over time.

Consumers who want to report an incident to FSIS are encouraged to do so by utilizing the online [Electronic Consumer Complaint Form](#) (eCCF) or by calling the toll-free USDA [Meat and Poultry Hotline](#) at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854).

Complaint Highlights for CY 2017:

- *In total, 1,068 consumer complaints were reported to CCMS in 2017. This represents a 1% decrease from 2016*
- *Almost half of consumer complaints were reported using the Electronic Consumer Complaint Form (eCCF)*
- *Foreign object was the most common primary complaint type reported in 2017 and all years since 2002*
- *Fully cooked-not shelf stable products and those containing chicken were associated with the most complaints*
- *Three product recalls resulted from CCMS consumer complaints in 2017*

This report summarizes data from the Consumer Complaint Monitoring System for CY 2017.

Complaint Reporting

From 2002 (the first full calendar year of documented consumer complaints in CCMS) through 2017, FSIS received a total of 14,437 consumer complaints in the United States and its territories (Figure 1). The largest number of complaints reported in any given year was 1,258 in 2007. The complaints were a result of multiple high-profile recalls. In the following years, the number of consumer complaints declined steadily until 2012 when FSIS released the Electronic Consumer Complaint Form (eCCF), an online reporting form, to enhance consumer complaint reporting options.

The eCCF is available 24 hours a day and offers the public, including state and local departments of health and schools, an additional means to report complaints to FSIS. Between 2012 and 2016 the total number of complaints reported increased annually but in 2017, the total number of complaints decreased slightly. In the same time period, reporting via the eCCF increased while usage of other reporting methods declined. In 2017, the eCCF remained the most common reporting channel utilized by the public for consumer complaints (Figure 2). There were 295 (36.9%) complaints reported via the eCCF in 2013 (the first full calendar year of eCCF data) and 529 (49.5%) in 2017. The eCCF was the most common reporting channel utilized by the public for consumer complaints reported to FSIS in 2017 (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Number of Complaints Reported to FSIS Annually, 2002-2017

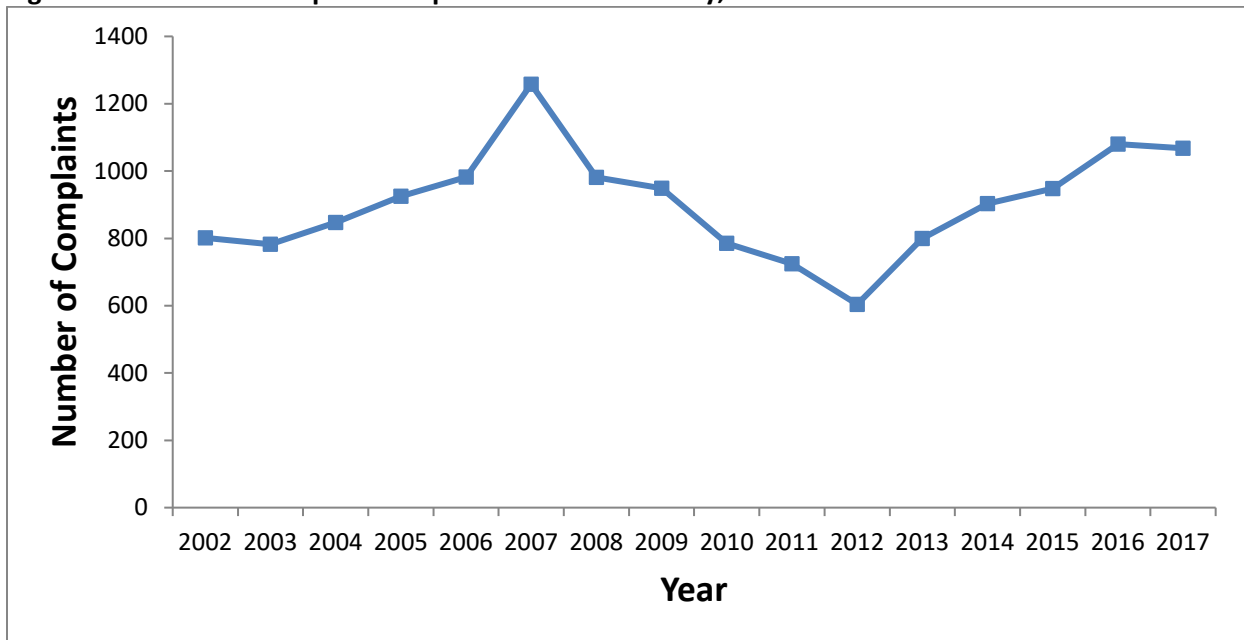
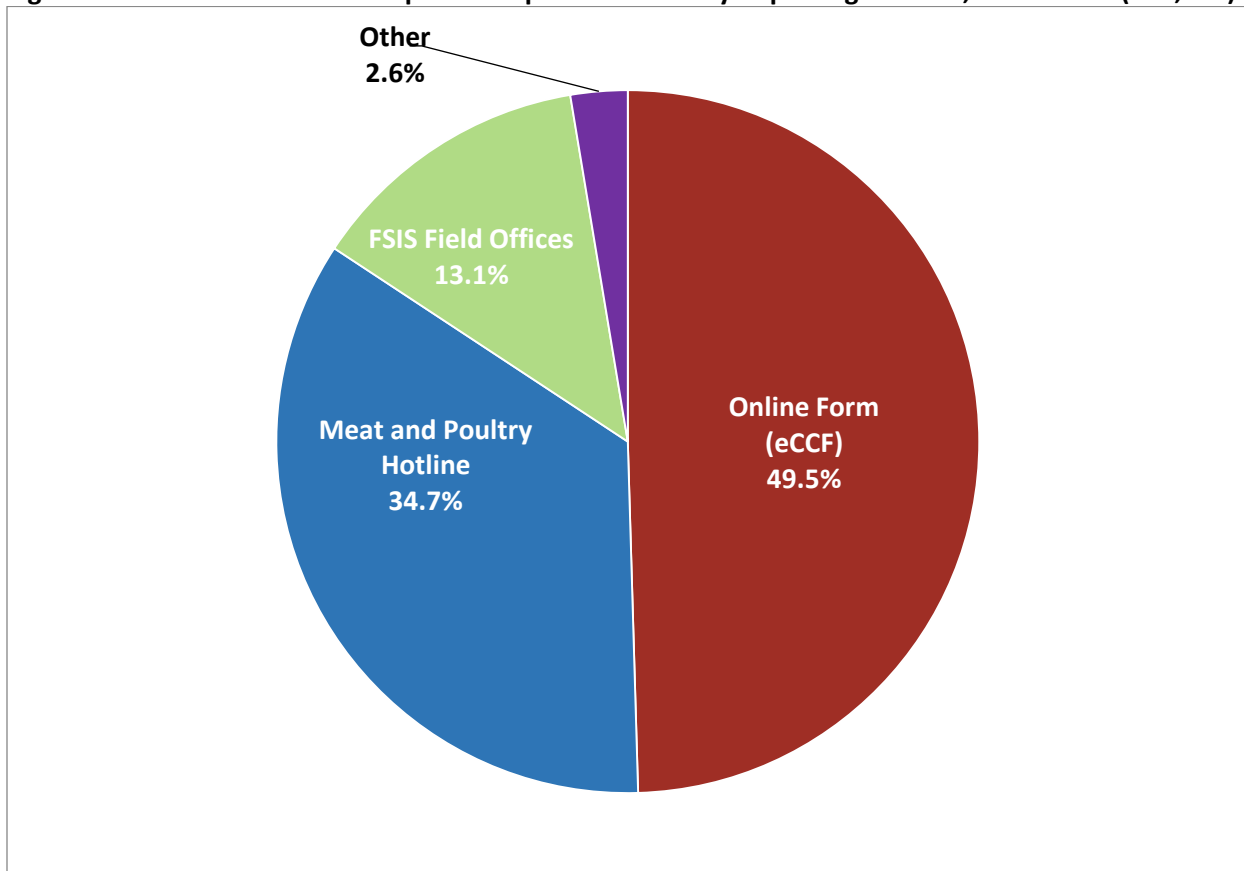


Figure 2. Percent Consumer Complaints Reported to FSIS by Reporting Method, CCMS 2017 (n=1,068)



[FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline](#)

[FSIS Field Offices](#): OFO-Office of Field Operations and OIEA-Office of Investigation, Audit and Enforcement.

Other: FSIS Office of Public Health Science (OPHS), state and local Health Departments, other federal agencies, etc.

Of the 1,068 complaints reported to FSIS in 2017, 215 involved food products not regulated by FSIS. One hundred eighty-seven (87.0%) of the complaints involving food products not regulated by FSIS were reported via the eCCF. Complaints involving food products such as fruits, vegetables, and those requiring further preparation at retail locations (e.g. restaurants and delis) were forwarded to the appropriate non-FSIS regulating agency, such as the Food and Drug Administration or state health department, for follow-up. The need to forward a consumer complaint to another authority may not be identified until an initial evaluation or investigation is completed by FSIS. When a consumer contacts FSIS to report a complaint, a case is created in CCMS, and may be associated with one or more FSIS-regulated products. The remainder of this report will focus on the 853 complaints reported to FSIS in 2017 involving 861 FSIS-regulated products (Eight complaints in 2017 involved more than one FSIS-regulated product and each product was counted individually).

Overall, products containing either chicken (275, 31.9%) or beef (224, 26.0%) commodities comprised 57.9% of all complaints reported (Table 1). Over one-third of the complaints reported were related to fully cooked-not shelf stable products (Table 2). These are finished products produced using a full lethality heat step (e.g. cooking) and can be eaten without further cooking (e.g., hot dogs).

Table 1. Number and Percent of Complaints per FSIS-Regulated Commodity* (n=861), 2017

Commodity	Number	Percent
Chicken	275	31.9%
Beef	224	26.0%
Pork	190	22.1%
Turkey	83	9.6%
Two or More ^a	68	7.9%
Other Meat ^b	12	1.4%
Egg	6	0.7%
Unknown ^c	3	0.3%

*Eight complaints in 2017 involved more than one FSIS-regulated product and each product was counted individually.

^a“Two or More” identifies products where more than one FSIS-regulated commodity was included in the ingredients, such as a sausage product containing beef and pork.

^b“Other Meat” includes lamb, buffalo, goat, or another FSIS-regulated commodity not otherwise listed.

^c“Unknown” indicates that product information provided by the consumer was insufficient to categorize further.

Table 2. Number and Percent of Complaints per Processing Category* (n=861), 2017

Processing Category ^a	Number	Percent
Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable	315	36.6%
Raw-Not Ground (Not Intact)	224	26.0%
Raw-Ground (Intact)	131	15.2%
Heat treated-Not Shelf Stable	64	7.4%
Canned/Retorted ^b	60	7.0%
Other ^c	53	6.2%
Unknown ^d	14	1.6%

*Eight complaints in 2017 involved more than one FSIS-regulated product and each product was counted individually.

^aUSDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. FSIS product categorization. Retrieved from:

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/abf595d-7fc7-4170-b7be-37f812882388/Product-Categorization.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>.

^b“Canned/Retorted”=“Thermally Processed-Commercially Sterile”.

^c“Other” includes “Heat Treated-Shelf Stable” and all other FSIS processing categories not otherwise listed.

^d“Unknown” indicates that product information provided by the consumer was insufficient to categorize further.

Complaint Types

Using information provided by consumers, complaints are carefully reviewed and categorized into one of seven main complaint type categories (Table 3): foreign object, illness, injury, off-quality, mislabeling or misbranded, allergic reaction, and other, non-specific. In the event that a case involves multiple complaint types, it is necessary to capture within the system which complaint is the primary or root cause of the report. An example of this is a complaint of a foreign object leading to an injury. For the purposes of this report, unless otherwise stated, all references to a specific complaint type refer to the “primary” complaint noted in the case.

Table 3. Description of CCMS Complaint Types

Complaint Type	Description
Foreign Object	The presence of an item(s) in a food or package that is not normally included in the ingredients or packaging, such as a piece of metal or other inedible material.
Illness	A sickness occurring hours to days after consumption of a food and symptoms may commonly include, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.
Injury	The occurrence of personal harm or damage as a result of handling or consuming a food, such as a broken tooth from a foreign object.
Off-Quality	The presence of a color, odor, texture, or taste that is different from what is perceived as normal or expected for the product, such as a food having a chemical smell.
Mislabeling or Misbranded	Labeling or packaging information that is false or misleading for the respective product or product that was not properly produced in an FSIS-regulated facility.
Allergic Reaction	A hypersensitivity reaction usually occurring within minutes to hours after consumption of a food and symptoms may include rash, itching, and difficulty breathing.
Other, Non-Specific	A situation where abnormalities are reported with the packaging of a product or a unique complaint which cannot be categorized as another type of complaint.

In 2017, the most common primary complaint type reported was foreign objects (Figure 3); this has been consistent for all years of CCMS data (Figure 4). Off-quality (201, 23.6%) and illness (160, 18.8%) were the second and third most commonly reported complaints. Between 2016 and 2017, the percentage of off-quality and foreign object complaints remained relatively constant. Between 2016 and 2017, illness complaints decreased by approximately 2%.

Figure 3. Percent Complaints by Primary Complaint Type (n=853), 2017

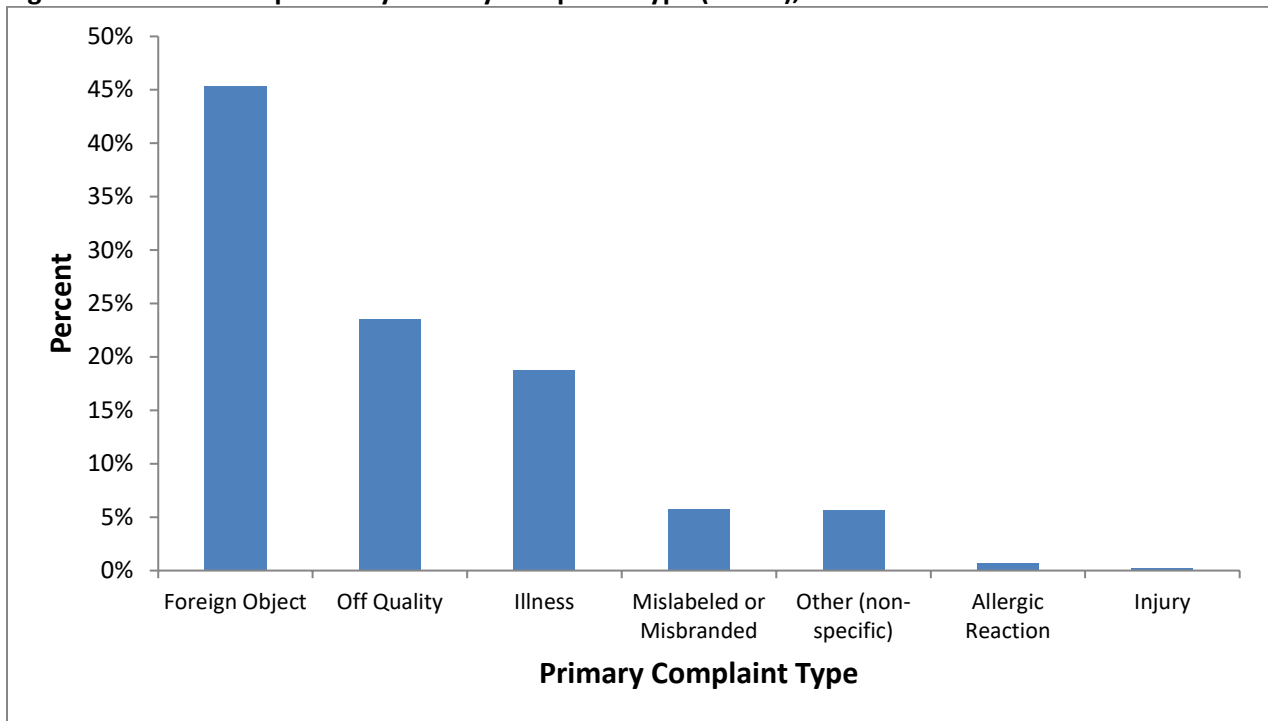
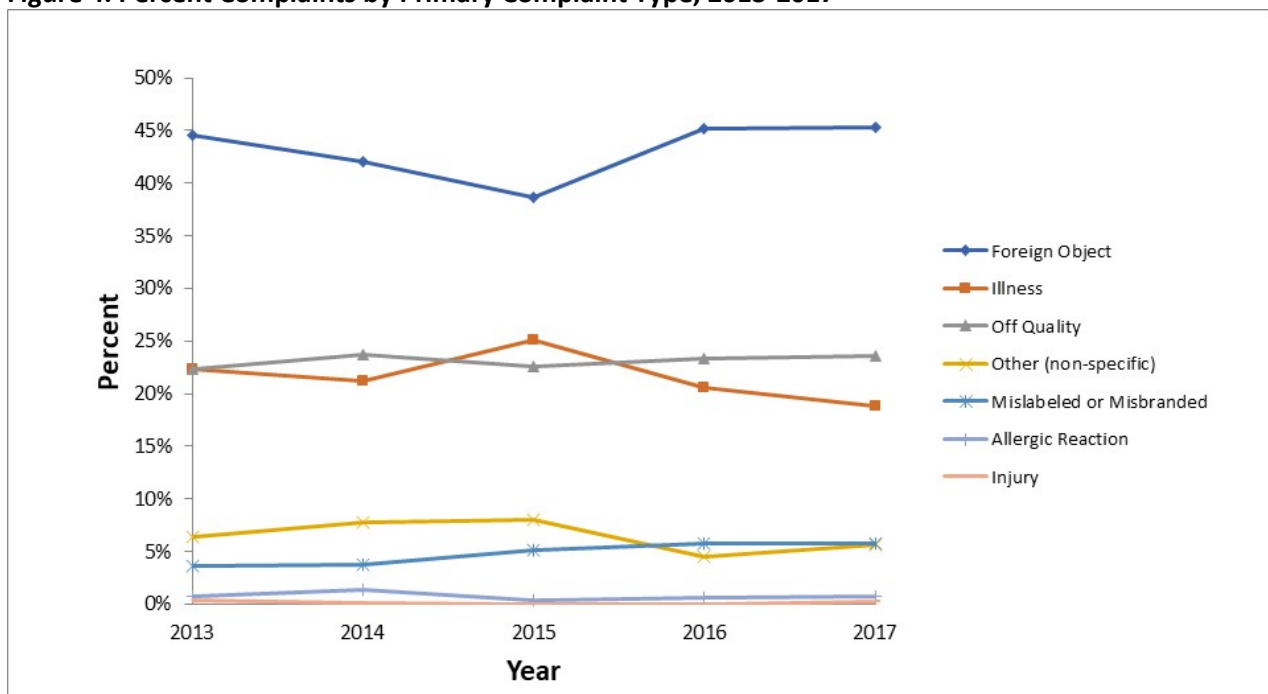


Figure 4. Percent Complaints by Primary Complaint Type, 2013-2017

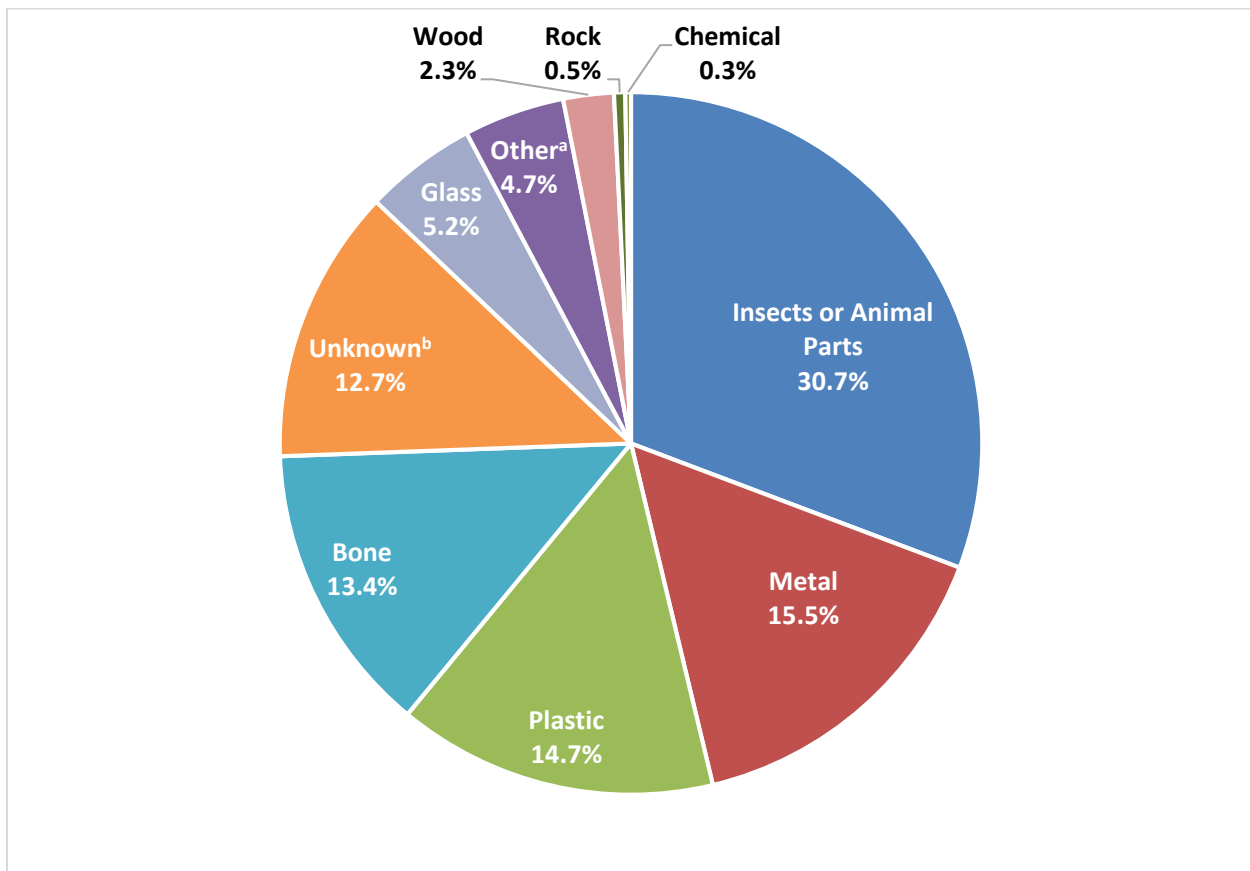


Foreign Objects and Injury

There were 387 (45.4%) foreign object complaints reported in 2017, which is consistent with 2016 (395/873, 45.2%). Insects or animal parts (119, 30.7%) were the foreign objects most frequently reported (Figure 5). Primary injury complaints without a foreign object present was reported in two complaints. These complaints involved cutting a finger on metal packaging and a chemical burn. Injury reported as a secondary complaint to a foreign object constituted 44 (11.3%) complaints. This is similar to the percentage of foreign object complaints with injury reported in 2016 (54, 13.7%).

Among complaints for which one or more injuries were reported (44), dental issues, i.e. broken or loose teeth and toothaches, (21, 47.7%) were the most common, followed by lacerations (15, 34.1%), and choking, (11, 25.0%). Reports of injury due to foreign objects in 2017 were most commonly associated with bones (15, 34.1%) and metal (9, 20.5%). An injury requiring a medical visit was reported in 13 complaints. Five (38.4%) of these medical visits involved choking from hard foreign material. Table 4 summarizes the primary foreign object complaints entered into CCMS in 2017.

Figure 5. Percent Types of Foreign Objects Reported (n=387) for Foreign Object Complaints, 2017



^a“Other” includes foreign objects such as a cell phone battery, fecal material, rocks, stems, and twine.

^b“Unknown” indicates that no description of the foreign object was provided by the consumer or the description provided was insufficient to categorize further.

Table 4. Summary of Primary Foreign Object Complaints, 2017

Foreign Object Complaints	
Number (%) of complaints	387 (45.4%)
Most common foreign object type reported	Insects or Animal Parts (119, 30.7%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Beef (110, 28.2%) ^a
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (151, 38.7%) ^a
Number of complaints leading to injury	44 (11.4%)
Reported medical visit	13/44 (29.5) reported from injury
Most common foreign object associated with injury	Bones
Most common injury reported with foreign object	Broken tooth or toothache

^aThere were 390 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 387 primary foreign object complaints.

Illness

Illness complaints decreased from 180 (20.6%) in 2016 to 160 (18.8%) in 2017. The most commonly reported illness symptoms were diarrhea (106, 65.4%), abdominal pain (106, 65.4%), vomiting (85, 52.5%), and nausea (82, 50.6%). A report of medical attention was involved in 65 (40.1%) of the illness complaints received in 2017. In seventeen (10.6%) of those reporting medical attention, the consumer reported being hospitalized at least 24 hours.

Laboratory confirmation of illness, in which culture or rapid tests were performed by a medical professional, was reported for one illness complaint. This complaint was reported for a confirmed positive *Campylobacter jejuni* diagnosis. A chicken product was reported as the suspected food vehicle in this complaint. Investigation into this illness did not definitively determine a link between the suspected food product and illness. Additional investigation or surveillance did not identify other illnesses; therefore, this complaint was determined to be isolated. Table 5 summarizes illness complaints entered into CCMS in 2017.

Table 5. Summary of Primary Illness Complaints, 2017

Illness Complaints	
Number (%) of complaints	160 (18.8%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (61, 37.7%) ^a
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (66, 40.7%) ^a
Most common reported first symptom onset range	0-3 hours (70, 43.2%)
Most common reported symptoms	Diarrhea (106, 65.4%) and abdominal pain (106, 65.4%)
Reported medical visit	65 (40.1%)
Medical visit with hospitalization of more than 24 hours	17/65 (26.2%) reported
Laboratory confirmed illnesses	1 reported; <i>Campylobacter</i> spp.

^aThere were 162 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 160 primary illness complaints.

Mislabeling or Misbranded and Allergic Reaction

Primary complaints of mislabeling or misbranding accounted for 49 (5.7%) consumer complaints in 2017, which is consistent with reports from 2016 (50, 5.7%). When characterized further, 27 (55.1%) complaints involved concerns that the ingredients statement or labeling claim (i.e. “Gluten Free”) was incorrect. Concerns about missing or incorrect USDA mark of inspection were also reported (7, 14.3%). There were 50 FSIS-regulated products for 49 mislabeling or misbranded complaints. Among these complaints, raw-not ground (21, 42.0%) was the most common processing type and chicken (19, 38.0%) was the most common commodity.

In 2017, six (<1%) complaints reported allergic reaction as the primary complaint type. These complaints were documented as a primary allergic reaction when the symptoms reported closely resembled those of an allergic reaction (e.g. rash, wheezing, etc.), and the consumer did not report a history of food allergies or indicate the product may be mislabeled. Medical attention with hospitalization lasting more than 24 hours was not reported in any of these complaints. Three (50.0%) allergic reaction complaints involved chicken and/or pork and the most common processing type was raw-not ground (3, 50.0%).

More commonly, allergic reaction was reported secondary to a complaint of mislabeling or misbranding (7/49, 14.3%). The most commonly reported symptoms were swelling (6), rash and/or itching (4), and difficulty breathing (3). Previous clinical diagnosis of an allergy to specific foods was reported in five of these complaints. Of these, three consumers reported shellfish allergies. Multiple allergies, including peanut, dairy, and egg, were reported by two consumers. Investigation into these complaints did not find evidence of product contamination with undeclared allergens. Medical attention was reported in two of these complaints and zero reported hospitalizations lasting more than 24 hours. Table 6 summarizes allergic reaction complaints secondary to mislabeling entered into CCMS in 2017.

Table 6. Summary of Allergic Reaction Complaints Secondary to Mislabeling or Misbranded, 2017

Secondary Allergic Reaction Complaints	
Number of secondary complaints	7 (14.3%) ^a
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Beef (3, 42.8%)
Most common processing type	Raw-Not Ground (3, 42.8%)
Most common reported first symptom onset	0-3 hour (6, 85.7%)
Most common reported symptom	Swelling (6, 85.7%)
Reported medical visit	2 (28.6%) reported
Reported hospitalization of more than 24 hours	0 reported
Most common diagnosed food allergy (of those self-reporting clinical diagnosis)	Shellfish

^a7 of 49 mislabeling or misbranding complaints reported allergic reaction as secondary complaints

Off-Quality

Off-quality complaints have consistently been one of the most common complaint types reported for all years. In 2017, off-quality complaints were the second most common complaint type (201, 23.6%). This was similar to the occurrence of off-quality complaints in 2016 (204, 23.4%). When these complaints were characterized further into one or more categories, moldy appearance (39, 19.4%) was the leading reported issue related to off-quality complaints, which was noted in 129 complaints. Reports of off-odor (42, 20.8%) and off-taste (39, 19.4%) were also commonly reported. There were 202 products associated with these complaints; Chicken (73, 36.1%) was the most common commodity reported and raw-not ground products (65, 32.2%) were the most common processing type reported for off-quality complaints.

Other, Non-Specific

Forty-eight (5.6%) complaints were recorded as other, non-specific in 2017. Thirteen (27.0%) of these complaints involved problems with packaging, such as an incomplete vacuum seal. Examples of other reports noted for this complaint type include concerns with sanitation and suspected fraud. This was an increase in the occurrence of other, non-specific complaints between 2016 and 2017 (28, 3.2% vs. 48, 5.6%). There were 60 products associated with these complaints; Chicken (14, 23.3%) was the most common commodity reported and fully cooked-not shelf stable products (17, 28.3%) were the most common reported processing type.

Resolution of Consumer Complaints

In 2017, 555 (65.1%) complaints were resolved without further investigative action by FSIS. The complaints were resolved after it was determined through consumer interview and complaint evaluation and analysis that the issue reported did not present a food safety concern or that the involved products had already been recalled and additional action was not warranted. The remaining complaints were resolved through other actions by FSIS: 178 (20.8%) complaints resulted in issuing alerts to inspection personnel for secondary review at the plant identified in the complaint; 22 (2.6%) were referred to FSIS' Office of Investigation, Enforcement and Audit for potential investigation into criminal violation or product tampering; and 93 (10.9%) prompted a non-criminal investigation.

Table 7. Summary of Complaints Resolved without Further Investigative Action, 2017

Investigations	
Number of complaints	555 (65.1%)
Most common complaint type	Foreign Object (207, 36.8%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (187, 33.3%) ^a
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (188, 33.5%) ^a

^aThere were 562 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 555 complaints resolved without further investigative action.

Triggers which led to requesting a formal investigation included, but were not limited to, reports of laboratory confirmed illnesses, evidence of a potentially wide-spread problem indicated by multiple similar complaints involving the same product and establishment, and a non-compliance history suggestive of a link between a complaint and problems in the plant that produced the product. At a minimum, a formal investigation includes: follow-up interviews with the consumer and in-plant personnel, collection of evidence by FSIS for verification, review of standard operating procedures, and inquiry of consumer complaints reported to the company. As necessary, the food product and any related evidence may be sent for laboratory sampling.

Out of 93 non-criminal investigations, FSIS did not find evidence of a public health hazard or issue requiring further investigation or action in 65 (69.9%) of investigated complaints. There were 76 (81.7%) foreign object complaints, making it the leading complaint type investigated. Twenty-eight (30.1%) investigations identified evidence of issues in the manufacturing plant that warranted additional response from the manufacturer or FSIS. Of these 28 investigations resulting in additional actions, voluntary actions initiated by the manufacturer in coordination with FSIS, such as retraining employees, were the most common (15). Investigations which revealed deficiencies that led to enforcement and regulatory actions, such as documenting non-compliances or regulatory action were less frequent (13). The complaint types attributed to these enforcement actions were foreign objects (9) and mislabeling (4). Between 2001-2017 there have been 17 recalls prompted by consumer complaints entered into CCMS. In 2017, six CCMS complaint investigations resulted in three product recalls: King’s Commands Foods LLC ([023-2017](#)), Marathon Enterprises Inc. ([082-2017](#)), and Hahn Brothers, Inc. ([88-2017](#)). Four of these consumer complaints were related to recall 082-2017, which involved the recall of 7,196,084 pounds of beef frankfurters and hot dog products due to bone fragments. In 2017, one consumer complaint investigation led to the halting of production of non-federally inspected products. Table 9 summarizes investigated complaints in 2017.

Table 8. Summary of Investigated Complaints, 2017

Investigations	
Number of complaints	93 (10.9%)
Most common complaint type	Foreign Object (76, 81.7%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (24, 25.8%) ^a
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (44, 47.3%) ^a
Investigations resulting in plant action	28 (30.1%)
Most common investigation plant action	Voluntary Plant Action (15/28, 53.6%)

^aThere were 94 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 93 complaints resolved through formal investigation.

Summary

Consumer complaints provide FSIS with valuable information on potential hazards associated with meat, poultry and egg products in commerce. They also provide information on hazards associated with certain food products, health-related outcomes associated with these hazards, and consumer reporting behaviors.

While this report provides a description of consumer complaints reported in 2017, there are considerations which should be taken into account. A number of factors can affect reporting each year and not all of the concerns that consumers may have with FSIS-regulated products are reported. Often, consumer complaint reporting increases after highly publicized recalls, such as those involving large illness outbreaks, suggesting that media attention can increase consumer reporting. The motivation to report an incident may increase when the consumer can confidently link a food product with a hazard such as a foreign object. This could help to explain why foreign object complaints have been the number one complaint type for all years that the data has been tracked. Because of potential fluctuations in reporting, it cannot be assumed that increases or decreases in complaint reporting represents an actual increase or decrease in the occurrence of any particular food hazard.

Complaints in which response actions do not rise to the level of a formal investigation may contain unverified information. As a result, certain details such as the specific type of foreign material may not be accurately reported to FSIS. The information presented in this report is documented as self-reported from the consumer or as further verified through a formal investigation. Understanding consumer perception of a food safety hazard can improve information gathering at the time of complaint intake and help FSIS guide its public health messaging.

The data provided in this report offers insight into consumer reporting behaviors and reinforces the importance of consumer complaints as indicators of potential food safety problems in commerce. Consumer complaints are an essential component of FSIS surveillance activities and enhance the Agency's ability to meet its public health mission.