

# FSIS Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS) Complaints Annual Report – Calendar Year (CY) 2016

## Contents

Introduction/Background .....	1
Complaint Reporting.....	2
Complaint Types .....	5
Foreign Objects and Injury.....	7
Illness .....	8
Mislabeling or Misbranding and Allergic Reaction .....	9
Off-Quality .....	10
Other, Non-Specific.....	10
Resolution of Consumer Complaints .....	10
Summary .....	12

## 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 2016:

- *In total, 1,080 complaints were reported to CCMS in 2016. This represents a 14% increase from 2015*
- *Over half of consumer complaints were reported using the Electronic Consumer Complaint Form (eCCF)*
- *Foreign object was the most common primary complaint type reported in 2016 and all years since 2002*
- *Fully cooked-not shelf stable products and those containing chicken were associated with the most complaints*
- *Three consumer complaints in 2016 led to product recalls*

**This report summarizes data from the Consumer Complaint Monitoring System for CY 2016.**

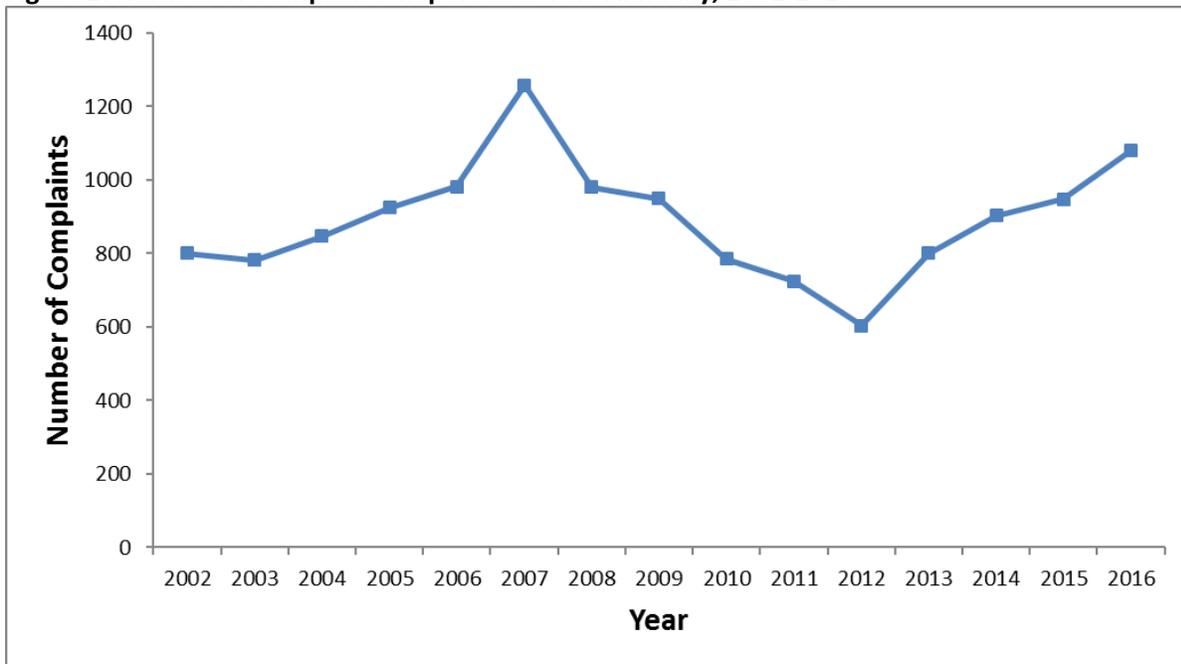
## Complaint Reporting

---

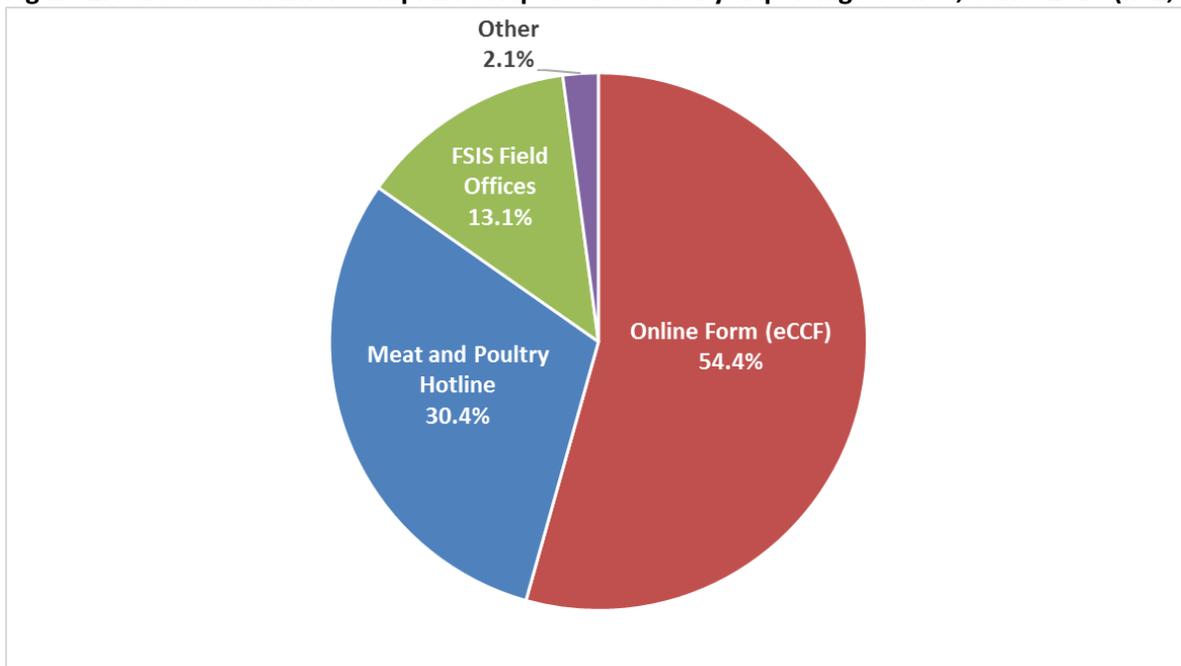
From 2002 (the first full calendar year of documented consumer complaints in CCMS) through 2016, FSIS received a total of 13,369 consumer complaints in the United States and its territories (Figure 1). The largest number of complaints reported in any given year was 1,258 in 2007; the complaints were 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.

Since the introduction of the eCCF in 2012 and continuing through 2016, the total number of complaints reported has increased annually. In the same time period, reporting via the eCCF increased while usage of other reporting methods remained relatively steady. There were 295 (36.9%) complaints reported via the eCCF in 2013 (the first full calendar year of eCCF data) and 587 (54.4%) in 2016. The eCCF was the most common reporting channel utilized by the public for consumer complaints reported to FSIS in 2016 (Figure 2).

**Figure 1. Number of Complaints Reported to FSIS Annually, 2002-2016**



**Figure 2. Percent Consumer Complaints Reported to FSIS by Reporting Method, CCMS 2016 (n=1,080)**



[FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline](#)

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

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

Of the 1,080 complaints reported to FSIS in 2016, 207 involved food products not regulated by FSIS. One hundred eighty-four (88.9%) 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 873 complaints reported to FSIS in 2016 involving 892 FSIS-regulated products (sixteen complaints in 2016 involved more than one FSIS-regulated product and each product was counted individually).

Overall, products containing either chicken (281, 31.5%) or beef (254, 28.5%) comprised 60% of all complaints reported (Table 1). Over one-third of the complaints reported were fully cooked-not shelf stable products (Table 2). These are finished products produced using a full lethality 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=892), 2016**

Commodity	Number	Percent
Chicken	281	31.5%
Beef	254	28.5%
Pork	197	22.1%
Two or More <sup>a</sup>	72	8.1%
Turkey	68	7.6%
Other Meat <sup>b</sup>	13	1.5%
Unknown <sup>c</sup>	5	0.6%
Egg	2	0.2%

\*Sixteen complaints in 2016 involved more than one FSIS-regulated product and each product was counted individually.

<sup>a</sup>“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.

<sup>b</sup>“Other Meat” includes lamb, rabbit, buffalo, venison, goat, or another FSIS-regulated commodity not otherwise listed.

<sup>c</sup>“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=892), 2016**

Processing Category <sup>a</sup>	Number	Percent
Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable	322	36.1%
Raw-Not Ground (Intact)	189	21.2%
Raw-Ground (Not Intact)	152	17.0%
Heat treated-Not Shelf Stable	94	10.5%
Canned/Retorted <sup>b</sup>	81	9.1%
Other <sup>c</sup>	42	4.7%
Unknown <sup>d</sup>	12	1.4%

\*Sixteen complaints in 2016 involved more than one FSIS-regulated product and each product was counted individually.

<sup>a</sup>USDA 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>.

<sup>b</sup>“Canned/Retorted” = “Thermally Processed-Commercially Sterile”.

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

<sup>d</sup>“Unknown” indicates that product information provided by the consumer was insufficient to categorize further.

## Complaint Types

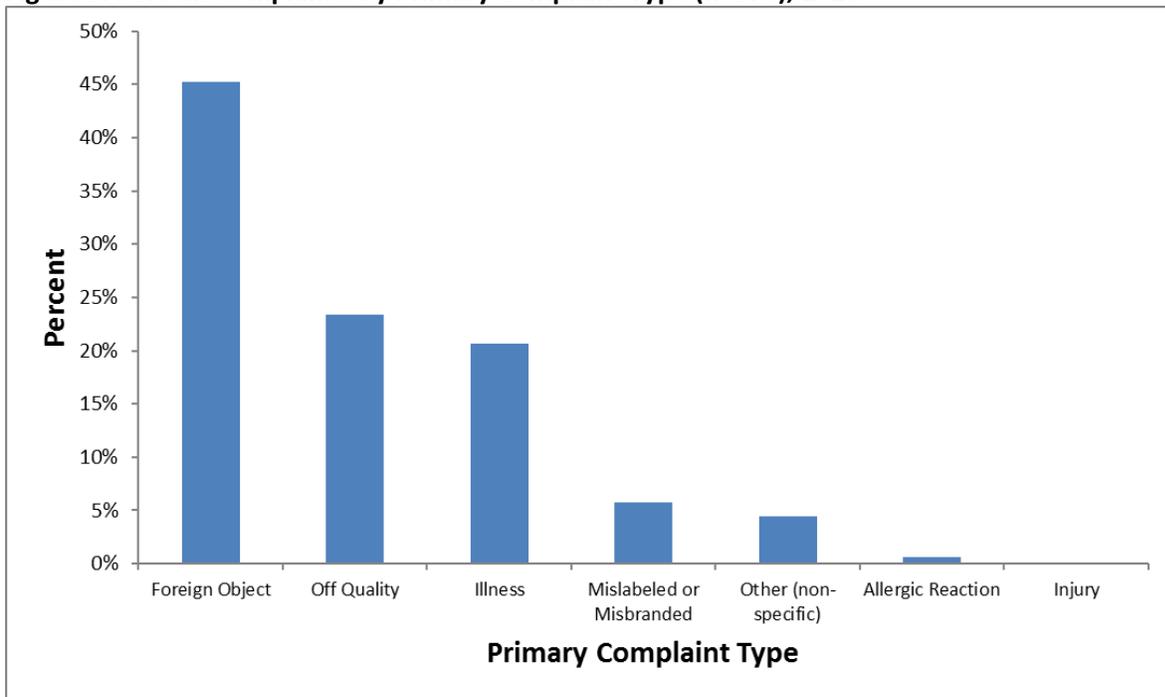
Using information provided by consumers, complaints are carefully reviewed and categorized into one of seven main complaint type categories (Table 3): foreign object, illness, injury, off-quality, mislabeling or misbranding, allergic reaction, and other, non-specific. In the event that a case involves 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**

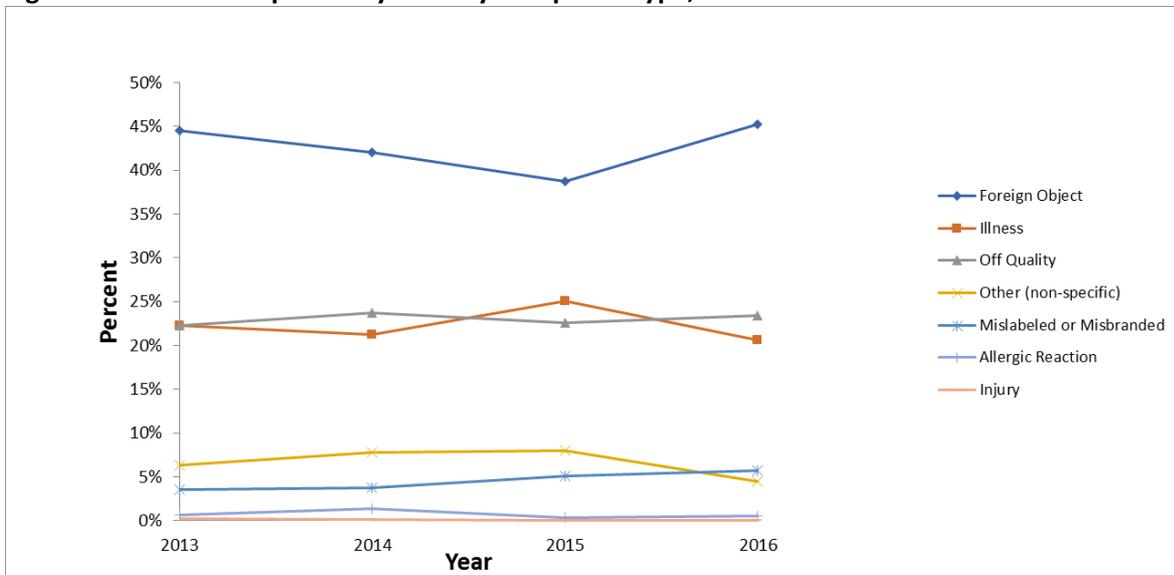
Complaint Type	Description
Foreign Object	The presence of an item(s) in a food or package that is not normally included in the ingredients or packaging, such as a piece of metal or other inedible material.
Illness	A sickness occurring hours to days after consumption of a food and symptoms may commonly 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 Misbranding	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 2016, the most common primary complaint type reported was foreign object (Figure 3); this has been consistent for all years of CCMS data. Reports of foreign objects decreased between 2013 and 2015 but increased between 2015 and 2016 (Figure 4). Off-quality (204, 23.4%) and illness (180, 20.6%) were the second and third most commonly reported complaint types, respectively, in 2016. This represents a change from 2015, where illness was the second and off-quality the third most commonly reported complaint types.

**Figure 3. Percent Complaints by Primary Complaint Type (n=873), 2016**



**Figure 4. Percent Complaints by Primary Complaint Type, 2013-2016**

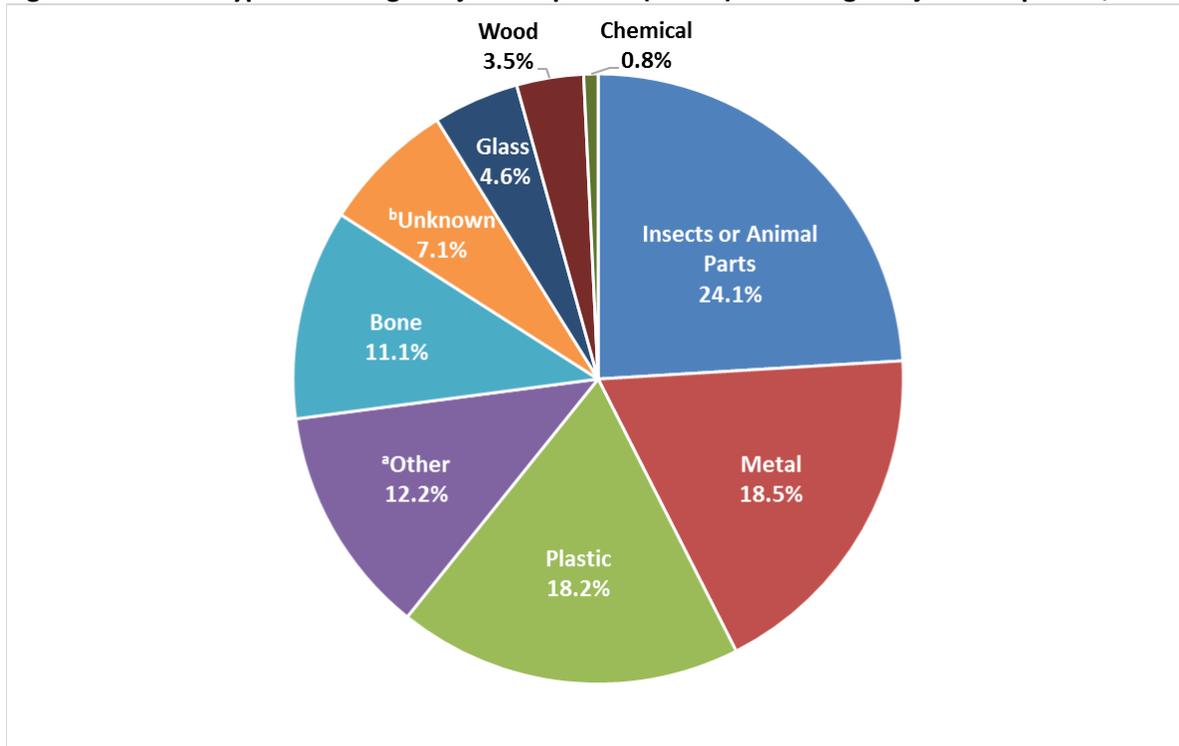


## Foreign Objects and Injury

There were 395 (45.2%) foreign object complaints reported in 2016, which is a slight increase from 2015 (325, 38.7%). Insects or animal parts (95, 24.1%) were the foreign objects most frequently reported (Figure 5). Injury without a foreign object present was not reported, but injury reported secondary to a foreign object constituted 13.7% (54) of foreign object complaints, similar to the percentage of foreign objects resulting in an injury reported in 2015 (43, 13.2%).

Among complaints for which one or more injuries were reported (54), the most common were tooth issues, i.e. broken/loose teeth or toothaches (17, 31.5%) and lacerations (16, 29.6%). Injury due to foreign objects was most commonly associated with bones (18, 33.3%) and metal (14, 25.9%). Eighteen (33.3%) injuries required medical attention; the most common injury that required medical attention involved broken/loose teeth or toothaches (8, 44.4%). Over 80% of injuries that required medical attention were caused by bone (10, 55.6%) or metal (5, 27.8%). Table 4 summarizes the primary foreign object complaints entered into CCMS in 2016.

**Figure 5. Percent Types of Foreign Objects Reported (n=395) for Foreign Object Complaints, 2016**



<sup>a</sup>“Other” includes foreign objects such as band-aids, fecal material, rocks, and styrofoam.

<sup>b</sup>“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, 2016**

Foreign Object Complaints	
Number of complaints	395 (45.3%)
Most common foreign object type reported	Insects and Animal Parts (95, 24.1%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (121, 30.3%) <sup>a</sup>
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (148, 37.1%) <sup>a</sup>
Number of complaints leading to injury	54 (13.7%)
Reported medical visit	18/54 (33.3%)
Most common foreign object associated with injury	Bones
Most common injury reported with foreign object	Broken tooth or toothache

<sup>a</sup>There were 399 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 395 foreign object complaints.

## Illness

Illness complaints decreased from 211 (25.1%) in 2015 to 180 (20.6%) in 2016. The most commonly reported illness symptoms in 2016 were abdominal pain (124, 68.9%), diarrhea (120, 66.7%), nausea (98, 54.4%), and vomiting (97, 53.9%). A report of medical attention was involved in 48 (26.7%) illness complaints received in 2016. In 14 (29.2%) of those reporting medical attention, the consumer reported being hospitalized for at least 24 hours.

Laboratory confirmation of illness in which culture or rapid tests were performed by a medical professional was reported for four illness complaints in 2016. Each of these four complaints reported a confirmed positive for a different pathogen: one *Campylobacter* spp, one *E. coli*, one *Salmonella* spp., and one *Shigella* spp. Complainants reported beef (2) and chicken (2) products as the suspected food vehicles in these complaints. Investigation into these illnesses did not definitively determine a link between the suspected food product and illness. A fifth laboratory-confirmed illness was also reported, but involved a retail-prepared product and was forwarded to the state health department for follow up (not included in table 5); this illness was determined to be part of a multistate outbreak associated with retail-prepared chicken products. Table 5 summarizes illness complaints entered into CCMS in 2016.

**Table 5. Summary of Primary Illness Complaints, 2016**

Illness Complaints	
Number (%) of complaints	180 (20.6%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (60, 31.8%) <sup>a</sup>
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (75, 39.7%) <sup>a</sup>
Most common reported first symptom onset range	0-3 hours (73, 41.7%)
Most common reported symptom	Abdominal pain (124, 68.9%)
Reported Medical visit	48 (26.7%)
Reported Hospitalization of more than 24 hours	14 reported
Laboratory-confirmed illnesses	4 reported
Most common confirmed etiology	<i>Campylobacter</i> spp., <i>E. coli</i> , <i>Salmonella</i> spp., <i>Shigella</i> spp. (1 each)

<sup>a</sup>There were 189 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 180 primary illness complaints.

## Mislabeling or Misbranding and Allergic Reaction

Primary complaints of mislabeling or misbranding accounted for 50 (5.7%) consumer complaints in 2016, a decrease from 2015 (67, 8.0%). When characterized further, 16 (32.0%) complaints reported concerns that the incorrect label may have been applied or the label misrepresented the product purchased. Fully cooked-not shelf stable products (18, 36.0%) were the most common processing types for mislabeling or misbranding complaints; chicken (16, 32.0%) was the most common commodity.

In 2016, five (<1%) complaints reported an allergic reaction as the primary complaint type; this is similar to 2015 when allergic reaction complaints also represented <1% of complaints. 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. Three allergic reaction complaints in 2016 reportedly required a medical visit and none reported a hospitalization of more than 24 hours. Pork (2) and chicken (2) were the most common commodities and all 5 allergic reaction complaints reported a fully cooked-not shelf stable product.

More commonly, allergic reaction was reported secondary to a complaint of mislabeling or misbranding (14/50, 28.0%). The most commonly reported symptoms were rash and/or itching (5), difficulty breathing (4), and nausea (3). Previous clinical diagnosis of an allergy to specific foods was reported in all 14 complaints; the most common reported allergies were peanut, milk, soy, egg, and shellfish. Investigation into these complaints resulted in one enforcement action due to labeling issues. Medical attention was reported for two of these complaints and one reported a hospitalization lasting more than 24 hours. Table 6 summarizes allergic reaction complaints secondary to mislabeling entered into CCMS in 2016.

**Table 6. Summary of Allergic Reaction Complaints Secondary to Mislabeling or Misbranding, 2016**

Secondary Allergic Reaction Complaints	
Number of secondary complaints	14 (28.0%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken and Pork (4 each, 28.6%) <sup>a</sup>
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (9, 64.3%) <sup>a</sup>
Most common reported first symptom onset	0-3 Hours (11, 78.6%)
Most common reported symptom	Rash (5, 35.7%)
Reported medical visit	2 (14.3%)
Reported hospitalization of more than 24 hours	1 reported
Most common diagnosed food allergy (of those self-reporting clinical diagnosis)	Peanut

<sup>a</sup>There were 16 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 14 allergic reaction complaints secondary to mislabeling or misbranding.

## Off-Quality

---

Off-quality complaints have consistently been one of the most common complaint types reported for all years. In 2016, off-quality complaints were the second most common complaint type (204, 23.4%). This represents a slight increase from 2015 (190, 22.6%), when off-quality complaints were the third most common complaint type. When these complaints were further characterized into one or more categories, off-appearance (129, 63.6%) was the leading issue related to off-quality complaints; off-appearance complaints include reports of moldy product, products that appeared to be an off color, or other situations where products did not appear as consumers believed they should. There were 206 products associated with these complaints; raw-not ground (69, 33.5%) and fully cooked-not shelf stable (67, 32.5%) products were the most commonly reported processing types for off-quality complaints. Chicken (69, 33.5%) was the most common commodity reported for off-quality complaints.

## Other, Non-Specific

---

Thirty-nine (4.5%) other, non-specific complaints were reported in 2016, a slight decrease from other non-specific complaints in 2015 (43, 5.1%). Nine (23.1%) other, non-specific complaints involved problems with product packaging, such as an incomplete seal. Examples of other reports noted for this complaint type include concerns with sanitation and suspected fraud. There were 41 products associated with these complaints; raw-not ground (10, 24.4%) and chicken (13, 31.7%) were the most commonly reported processing type and commodity for other, non-specific complaints.

## Resolution of Consumer Complaints

---

In 2016, 486 (55.7%) 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: 196 (22.5%) complaints resulted in issuing alerts to inspection personnel for secondary review at the plant identified in the complaint, 26 (3.0%) were referred to FSIS' Office of Investigation, Enforcement, and Audit for potential investigation into criminal violation or product tampering, and 165 (18.9%) prompted a non-criminal investigation.

**Table 7. Summary of Complaints Resolved without Further Investigative Action, 2016**

Investigations	
Number of complaints	486 (55.7%)
Most common complaint type	Foreign Object (164, 33.7%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Chicken (167, 33.4%) <sup>a</sup>
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (179, 35.8%) <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>There were 500 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 486 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 widespread problem indicated by multiple similar complaints involving the same product and establishment, and a noncompliance history suggestive of a link between a complaint and problems in the establishment 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 165 non-criminal investigations in 2016, FSIS did not find evidence of a public health hazard or issue requiring further action in 105 (63.6%) of investigated complaints. Foreign object complaints (123, 74.5%) were the leading complaint type investigated. Sixty (36.4%) investigations identified evidence of issues in the establishment that warranted additional response from the manufacturer or FSIS. Of these 60 investigations resulting in additional actions, voluntary actions initiated by the establishment in coordination with FSIS, such as retraining employees, were the most common (52). Investigations which revealed deficiencies that led to enforcement actions (5), such as documenting noncompliance records, or regulatory actions (3), such as recalling product, were less frequent. Between 2001-2016, there have been 14 recalls prompted by consumer complaints entered into CCMS, including three recalls in 2016: Foster Farms recalled chicken nugget products due to potential contamination with blue plastic and black rubber ([033-2016](#)), Gourmet Pasta Products LLC recalled meat pasta products due to mislabeling and undeclared soy, sodium nitrite, and sodium erythrobate ([067-2016](#)), and Klement's Sausage Company recalled beef snack sticks due to potential contamination with extraneous material ([104-2016](#)). Table 8 summarizes investigated complaints in 2016.

**Table 8. Summary of Investigated Complaints, 2016**

Investigations	
Number of complaints	165 (18.9%)
Most common complaint type	Foreign Object (123, 74.5%)
Most common FSIS-regulated commodity	Beef (52, 30.6%) <sup>a</sup>
Most common processing type	Fully Cooked-Not Shelf Stable (70, 41.2%) <sup>a</sup>
Investigations resulting in plant action	60 (36.4%)
Most common investigation resolving action	Voluntary plant action (52/60, 86.7%)

<sup>a</sup>There were 170 FSIS-regulated products reported for the 165 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, health-related outcomes associated with these hazards, as well as consumer reporting behaviors.

While this report provides a description of consumer complaints reported in 2016, 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 represent the actual 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 offer 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.