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# Salmonella scare sends peanut butter sales diving

By Theresa Howard, USA TODAY

The country's biggest makers of jarred peanut butter have told consumers that their products are safe, but Americans aren't buying that — or their products.

Jarred peanut butter sales for brands such as Skippy, Peter Pan ([CAG](#)) and Jif ([SJM](#)) fell by as much as 24% since the salmonella outbreak, retail trackers say.

Information Resources reports that unit sales of jarred peanut butter dropped by 24% for the four weeks ended Jan. 25 from the same period a year ago. The Nielsen Co. says unit sales fell 22% for the period ended Jan. 24 vs. the same period last year.

Companies behind the big brands have stepped up marketing efforts to offset sales. ConAgra and J.M. Smucker recently ran ads to reassure people that their products are safe and did not include peanuts from Peanut Corp. of America. ConAgra ads in 50 newspapers included a 50-cents-off coupon for its Peter Pan brand. Some Smucker newspaper ads for Jif have dangled \$1-off coupons.

For peanut butter makers, the stakes are huge. The recession has nudged millions of consumers to lug lunch to school or work, but more are turning away from peanut butter in confusion and fear.

When consumers visit most of the big peanut butter makers' websites, they immediately see messages extolling the safety of the brands. "We're monitoring consumer reaction and questions to determine if there are any other activities we need to do," says Stephanie Childs, ConAgra spokeswoman.

Brand expert Robert Passikoff says they all need to do much more to make consumers less fearful.

"Brands have been unable to deflect the fears," says Passikoff, president of Brand Keys and author of *The Certainty Principle: How to Generate Brand Profits in the Consumer Engagement Marketplace*. "There has been advertising, but the issues have been so unclear. People are not willing to take a chance."

Tuesday, Congress stepped up its investigation, issuing a subpoena for Peanut Corp. President Stewart Parnell in the salmonella investigation. Private lab tests show there may have been salmonella at a second plant operated by the peanut company at the center of a national outbreak, but the potentially tainted products were not sent to consumers, Texas health officials said Tuesday.

Federal investigators have linked peanut products made at Peanut Corp. of America's southwest Georgia peanut-processing plant to the salmonella outbreak that has sickened 575 people and may

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have contributed to as many as eight deaths.



On Monday, the FBI raided the plant in Blakely, Ga., hauling off boxes and other material. Agents executed search warrants at both the plant and at Peanut Corp.'s headquarters in Lynchburg, Va., a senior congressional aide with knowledge of the raids told the Associated Press. The official spoke only on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

*Contributing: The Associated Press*

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