

Playing chicken . . . safely

Why we need to think bigger when it comes to chicken safety

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Each year, about 48 million Americans get sick and 3,000 die from eating food tainted with salmonella, campylobacter, and other contaminants, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More deaths are attributed to contaminated chicken than any other food, with salmonella as the leading cause of death.

At the [Food Safety and Sustainability Center](#) at Consumer Reports, we are very interested in the systemic causes of safety problems in the food supply. This gives us a unique view of what continues to be wrong—and what is getting worse—about meat safety in the U.S.

Despite attempts in this country to address meat safety and cleanliness at the processing plant, the United States continues to lag behind many countries when it comes to the safety of its meat. We believe that to be in large part because of the failure to implement systemic solutions, including sound practices in livestock agriculture and slaughterhouses.

We recently tested 316 samples of raw chicken breasts bought from stores across the country, and found salmonella on 10.8 percent of samples. We also found campylobacter, another pathogen, on 43 percent. (Read our report "[The High Cost of Cheap Chicken](#).")

Chickens raised for meat in the U.S. are often treated with subtherapeutic doses of antibiotics to prevent disease and promote growth. The Food and Drug Administration recently issued guidance that recognizes this problem and begins to address these uses. But much more is needed. The practice of antibiotic overuse can have disastrous side effects, as it can lead to antibiotic resistance in harmful bacteria such as salmonella and campylobacter, which then makes it harder to treat people who get sick. We found at least one multidrug-resistant pathogen on about half of samples and at least two multidrug-resistant pathogens on almost 12 percent of samples we tested.

Part of the chicken industry approach is that if poultry are contaminated with feces during slaughter, some companies use chemical disinfectants and chlorine baths to disinfect after the fact.

Some will argue that these measures—antibiotics, disinfectants, chlorine baths—are necessary to control harmful bacteria. But these are Band-Aid solutions in a broken system. If we are serious about food safety, we have to take a comprehensive approach that includes monitoring, government enforcement, and changing how we raise and slaughter animals for food.

We are not the first or only country to face this problem. In Denmark, more than 65 percent of commercial chicken broiler flocks tested positive for salmonella contamination around 1989. The



Most chickens raised in the U.S. spend their lives in conditions like this.

country put in place strict standards, addressing the roots of the problem and has prohibited daily doses of low-level antibiotics fed to healthy animals and chemical disinfectants. Salmonella contamination declined sharply. By 2000, rates were less than 5 percent. Systemic solutions were implemented throughout the European Union. In fact, government data show that 22 countries in 2010 met the European target for less than or equal to 1 percent contamination of two important salmonella types in their broiler flocks.

In the country with the world's lowest salmonella rates, Sweden, the government requires chicken producers to also implement better practices including good hygiene in hatcheries and farms, prohibits chemical disinfectants and subtherapeutic antibiotics, and requires extensive testing and monitoring. Flocks are tested before entering the slaughterhouse and have to be destroyed if a bird tests positive. And the chickens are tested again after slaughter. Contaminated birds can certainly never be sold to consumers. (The US allows up to 7.5 percent contamination rates with salmonella of whole chickens, over 40 percent for ground chicken, and has no standard for salmonella in chicken parts).

In an attempt to address salmonella contamination in this country, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recently released an Action Plan. The first item on the list is a so-called proposed modernization of poultry slaughter inspection. Currently, USDA inspectors in poultry houses inspect slaughtered chickens that hang upside down on a slaughter line, which zips along at a maximum speed of 140 birds per minute. A new USDA rule currently under consideration could *increase* the maximum line speed to 175 birds per minute—almost 3 birds per second. The “modernization” could reassign some of the USDA inspectors’ duties to plant employees. When it comes to better hygiene, USDA needs to set mandatory microbial standards for all meat products so producers have a clear safety target to meet.

The health and safety of the food system requires an action plan for change from the ground up. And the good news is that there are those farming on the progressive side of chicken production—a demonstration that it is possible and economically viable to produce chicken more sustainably.



We recently met Will Harris, the owner of White Oak Pastures Farm in Georgia. He shifted from an industrial-style, chemical- and drug-intensive system to a sustainable model of farming, and his chickens are raised on pasture. His farm has four animal welfare label certifications. Many farmers are not only changing the way they raise the animals, but also how animals are slaughtered.

Like Harris in Georgia, Greg Gunthorp, a farmer in northern Indiana, has his own USDA-inspected slaughterhouse on the farm, where he processes about 6 to 8 birds per minute. Having a dedicated processing plant means he avoids cross-contamination from the conventional poultry being processed with his sustainable chicken. And he doesn't use chlorine to “disinfect” the birds before selling it to the customers.

These courageous farmers voluntarily took steps to implement sustainable practices not because it was



On the Gunthorp family farm in northern Indiana.



easier but because it was the right thing to do for their workers, their animals, and the food they sell to us. They have shown that it is possible, and even economically viable, to clean up chicken coops, provide clean living conditions for animals inside and outside, to minimize stress to the animals, feed the animals what they would naturally eat, and to not feed drugs to healthy animals. They provide a meaningful alternative for consumers who want to choose meat that comes from sustainable and healthy farms.

In order to accelerate the demand for meat and poultry produced with better production practices, consumers should look for reliable companies and labels. Labels that are backed by rigorous and meaningful standards include Animal Welfare Approved for beef, pork, and chicken, and American Grassfed Certified for beef. USDA Organic is also a strong label, which prohibits feeding chicken parts back to chickens and prohibits antibiotics after the first day of life. But there is room for improvement and we continue to advocate with the U.S. Department of Agriculture for stronger organic standards.

And don't bother with labels such as "natural," "free range," "cage free," and "no hormones," which aren't meaningful. (Read more about [labels on chickens](#).)

When other countries take a systemic approach to a meat safety problem and see a steady decline in salmonella contamination rates, there is no reason why the U.S. meat supply can't also move in that direction. Instead, since 1998, Consumer Reports' tests of chicken have shown salmonella rates have not changed much, ranging between 11 percent and 16 percent. And contamination with multidrug-resistant pathogens continues.

Our government needs to step up and protect consumers. The chicken industry needs to quit focusing on cutting costs and start focusing on saving people's lives. It's time to tackle the *system* of animal agriculture that sickens and kills people, and quit using Band-Aid solutions, especially Band-Aids that allow the problem to fester underneath.

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