

CSPI

Science in the
Public
Interest

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SUBJECT: Turkey Press Conference : Speech + Press Release

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**Remarks of Caroline Smith DeWaal
Director of Food Safety
at the National Press Club**

**Washington, D.C.
November 19, 1999**

With Thanksgiving fast approaching, everyone is no doubt looking forward to getting together with family and friends for a holiday feast. One of the greatest joys, as we gather around our tables each year with grandparents and grandkids, is how many generations are represented. But the most wise and most precious members of our family are also those at the greatest risk of food poisoning. So it is important to take extra precautions to keep food safe during this banquet season.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released data in September showing that two bacteria commonly found in poultry are frequent causes of food poisoning. This chart shows that these fowl hazards, *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, are responsible for an estimated 79% of illnesses, 72% of hospitalizations, and 50% of all deaths linked to food-borne bacteria.

Last year, when the Morning Newsmakers Program invited me to speak about holiday food safety, I talked a lot about *Campylobacter*. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) had just released a survey on turkeys showing that 90% of the turkeys tested in slaughter plants in 1996 and 1997 were contaminated with *Campylobacter*. That survey also documented that over 18% of turkeys were contaminated with *Salmonella*. Even today, USDA's 1996-97 survey is the most complete examination of food-safety hazards in turkeys. Unfortunately, the survey was conducted before the new system for minimizing hazards started in the meat and poultry industry.

This year, Center for Science in the Public Interest hoped to document changes in turkey safety due to the newly-implemented hazard control systems (called HACCP) now used in most turkey plants. So we went to USDA to investigate what evidence they had that would document changes in turkey safety under the new program. What we found was troubling.

Although USDA has evidence showing that many chicken, pork, and ground beef plants have dramatically improved their performance under HACCP, essentially slicing their *Salmonella* contamination rates in half or better, there are no data whatsoever showing how turkey slaughter plants are performing. In fact, the agency isn't even running *Salmonella* tests in turkey slaughter plants. The reason? Nearly two years after the new program started, the



USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service is tied up in knots with bureaucratic red tape that is undermining its public health responsibilities.

USDA won't run any microbial tests on turkeys until it has developed a *Salmonella* performance standard for whole turkeys. But last year, the agency published the data on which to base a standard. In the year since that data were published, the agency has taken no public action to finalize a performance standard, and it simply isn't testing any turkeys. USDA should stop giving the turkey industry a holiday from important microbial safety checks.

Finding no testing data from the government, CSPI next went to the turkey processors to ask them to put their own test results on the table. Many plants are testing their products, so we thought they would jump at a chance to toot their own horn by showing that their *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* levels "were better than the baseline," meaning that they were better than the 1996-97 USDA survey. But the turkey industry wouldn't share its results with the public, even to show that the companies were improving.

So CSPI decided to run its own microbial safety checks on turkeys. With the help of Glenn Morris, a medical doctor and researcher with the University of Maryland Medical School, we designed our own study. We sent sleuths to supermarkets in five cities to collect 50 turkeys. Our sleuths put the turkeys in coolers and sent them to Baltimore to be tested for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. Our findings will probably surprise you:

- Fresh turkeys were much more likely than frozen turkeys to be contaminated. Twenty-eight percent of the fresh turkeys tested positive for *Campylobacter*, but the rate for frozen turkeys was only 4%.
- Eight of the fifty turkeys, or 16%, were contaminated with *Campylobacter*. This is far lower than the 90% positive finding in the 1996-97 USDA turkey survey, which is partially explained because the USDA tested earlier in the process, before the turkeys had been refrigerated or frozen. CSPI's finding needs to be backed up by a government testing program for *Campylobacter* in all poultry products, which doesn't exist today.
- Turkeys from California were much more likely to be contaminated with *Campylobacter* than turkeys from the other states we surveyed. Assuming this finding is true for other poultry products as well, it would help to explain foodborne illness data collected by CDC's Foodnet program, showing that California has a higher incidence of *Campylobacter* illnesses than any other survey site.
- Most surprising of all, not one of the 50 turkeys was contaminated with *Salmonella*. Thus, the new hazard control systems in turkey plants appear to be reducing *Salmonella*. This is good news for consumers, but, as with all these

figures, bear in mind that this study is hardly definitive. We tested only 50 turkeys in five cities. Our tests only give an indication of current conditions in the turkey slaughter plants. It doesn't alleviate the need for a government sampling program for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in turkey slaughter plants to assure the industry is controlling pathogens.

CSPI's data support the fact that freezing helps to eliminate *Campylobacter*, so consumers should be especially careful when handling a fresh turkey. Both the *Salmonella* results and the *Campylobacter* results are far better than we expected. Fresh or frozen, based on our small survey, there is room for optimism that the turkeys we love to eat during the holidays are becoming safer because of new government requirements. However, CSPI's results are no guarantee that the turkey you bring home is free from harmful bacteria.

Good news shouldn't give way to sloppy practices in the kitchen. Whenever serving older guests or young children, and to assure an all-around great holiday, it is vital to remember the basics of safe-food preparation:

- To ensure that dangerous bacteria don't contaminate other foods, keep your turkey double-wrapped in your refrigerator or freezer. Make certain that when you are handling the turkey, your counters are clear. Everything that touches the raw or partially cooked turkey needs to be scrubbed thoroughly with warm, soapy water. This includes your hands, thermometers, and any other implements that touch the turkey.
- Proper defrosting is critical to ensure thorough cooking. Move your twenty-pound turkey from the freezer to the refrigerator on Sunday. A day or so earlier for a bigger one; a day or so later for a smaller one.
- Thermometers help take the guesswork out of food safety. They also are getting faster and easier to read. Here are some examples of instant-read dial thermometers or instant-read digital thermometers. These are highly reliable and easy-to-use. Oven-safe thermometers are also convenient because they can stay in the oven while the turkey cooks.
- Don't forget to calibrate before you celebrate. Before you put that thermometer in the turkey, take a minute to calibrate it in a cup of crushed ice topped off with tap water. Put the tip at least two inches deep in the ice water without touching either the side or the bottom of the cup. After 30 seconds, check that it reads 32°F.
- The best place to check the turkey's temperature is in the thickest part of the thigh, away from the bone. Checking it in several places is safest. When the thermometer reads 180°F, your turkey is done. We recommend you use a

thermometer even if your turkey has a pop-up timer, because the pop-up variety may not always be accurate.

- Be sure that your stuffing reaches 165°F. Warm, moist stuffing inside a turkey is a great place for bacteria to grow. If you don't have a thermometer, be sure to thoroughly heat your stuffing on the stove after removing it from the turkey, or better yet, cook it on the stove instead of inside the bird.

All these steps will pay off with a healthy and worry-free holiday celebration. After all, a big serving of delicious, properly cooked turkey, handled with care in the kitchen, is harmless, except maybe for your waistline.



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

November 18, 1999, 10:00 a.m.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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USDA Should Stop Giving Turkey Industry a 'Holiday' From Safety Checks

CSPI Tests Find 28% of Fresh Turkeys Contaminated

WASHINGTON - At a news conference today, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) released findings from bacteria testing of turkeys purchased in five U.S. cities. In the new CSPI study, laboratory tests were conducted to determine bacteria levels on fresh and frozen turkeys.

Of the turkeys tested, 28% of the 25 fresh and 4% of the 25 frozen contained the potentially harmful bacteria *Campylobacter*. The turkeys were purchased at local supermarkets in Washington, D.C., New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Miami/Ft. Lauderdale. The tests, which were conducted for CSPI by a university laboratory in Baltimore, Maryland, found:

- A total of 16% of all turkeys tested were contaminated with *Campylobacter*.
- Fresh turkeys in the sample were more likely than the frozen turkeys to be contaminated.
- Turkeys from Los Angeles were more frequently contaminated than turkeys from Washington, DC, New York, Chicago, and Miami.
- Not one of the turkeys tested was contaminated with *Salmonella*.

"Last year the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released data that showed that 90% of the turkeys tested in 1996 and 1997 were contaminated with *Campylobacter* and 18% were contaminated with *Salmonella*," said Caroline Smith DeWaal, director of food safety for CSPI.

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"This year, CSPI hoped to look at the latest USDA data showing whether or not new mandatory safety systems are making turkeys safer. Instead, we found that USDA has no new data on turkey contamination and is not even running mandatory *Salmonella* tests in turkey slaughter plants," continued DeWaal.

"The good news for consumers is that none of the turkeys we tested was contaminated with *Salmonella*. The bad news is that some of the turkeys were contaminated with *Campylobacter*. But our small study is no substitute for systematic government testing. The USDA needs to immediately get their sampling program running and stop giving the turkey industry a holiday from microbial safety checks," said DeWaal. "In addition, USDA should add *Campylobacter* to its turkey-testing regimen."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 77 million people are sickened and 5,000 killed each year by food poisoning. *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* cause nearly 80% of the illnesses and 50% of the deaths linked to foodborne bacteria.

"Good news shouldn't lead to sloppy practices in the kitchen. You should always follow food-safety guidelines, especially when serving older people or young children. Holiday meal preparers can improve their chances of avoiding food poisoning by washing their hands frequently, keeping turkeys refrigerated, washing counters thoroughly with hot soapy water before and after handling their turkey, and cooking the turkey to 180 degrees," concluded DeWaal.

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The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nonprofit health-advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. It is well known for advocating improved food-inspection programs and safer food additives. CSPI is supported largely by the nearly one million U.S. and Canadian subscribers to its Nutrition Action Healthletter.