

2. Poultry

The Poultry Explosion. Chicken and turkey have become highly over-rated foods in recent years as handy replacements for fatty red meat. The exposure of the many health risks of eating red meat led us to seek alternatives. Poultry has since enjoyed a popularity wildly surpassing its reserved 1950s image as "Sunday chicken dinner," or as annual Thanksgiving turkey dinner. (Note that cancer rates have soared since those days, and many believe our contaminated poultry supply may be partly responsible.) Americans now eat turkey or chicken every day, even several times a day.

Many conventional dieticians and physicians, responding to the red meat exodus, began to recommend poultry (with occasional fish) as the number one ready substitute for red meat. The poultry industry responds by increasing the variety of chicken and turkey products on display at our markets. You had to request ground turkey or ground chicken, for example, before the poultry explosion. Now there is a poultry avalanche of raw and cooked chicken and turkey, cut and pounded into every imaginable shape (including star-shaped chicken nuggets), that equals or exceeds the size of the meat section.

Frozen dinners are also almost all poultry offerings. Recently, more beef and pork choices have appeared in frozen dinners, as consumers tire of poultry. This red meat renaissance occurs ironically at precisely the time when the National Institutes of Health has just discovered more red flags for red meat.

Many alternative nutritionists and physicians, especially naturopaths, recommend certain soy products over red meat and poultry, promoting a protective vegan or vegetarian diet. It is well known that vegetarians develop fewer degenerative diseases than meat- or poultry-eaters.

Media food consultants tend to ignore this fact, and still tell us that poultry is lower in saturated fat than red meat, that chicken costs less, and that ground chicken or turkey can be substituted for red meat in lower-fat recipes for favorites such as chili, meatballs, and sausages. Poultry appeals to America on the basis of convenience and minimal change.

Turkey can be turned into bacon and cold cuts; magazines advise you to trade in your salami sandwich for a lower-fat turkey salami sandwich, though you still get the nitrites and salt, and perhaps indigestion. Purists began to develop organic turkey cold cuts without

preservatives, but these can exceed the cost of red meat products, and may not be affordable at every table. Even if they do reach your table, what might you be getting?

Question 1: Is poultry contaminated? You be the judge. According to the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), “[I]t is the presence of feces on meat and poultry that causes humans to ingest foodborne pathogens and, therefore, get sick from eating these products.”¹⁶⁴

“Despite the “official” USDA policy of zero tolerance for fecal contamination, the extraordinary rates of foodborne illness in this country are,” according to the PCRM, “directly caused by eating poultry and meat contaminated with feces even though they passed inspection by USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (“FSIS”).¹⁶⁵

The PCRM further states, “Because current USDA regulations are too weak to guarantee that adulterated poultry and meat will not be sold to consumers, USDA has implemented programs that place the burden squarely on consumers to kill foodborne pathogens on their fecally contaminated meat and poultry—or suffer the potentially deadly consequences.”¹⁶⁶

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine Petition to the USDA-FSIS concludes, in part, with the following recommendations: "Amend Title 9 of the Code of Federal Regulations to mandate a biohazard warning label on all meat and poultry products that states: "Biohazard: This product may be contaminated with feces and, therefore, hazardous to your health," and "[M]andate a poultry inspection legend that does not include the word 'wholesome' or any other descriptive word that implies that poultry products are safe to eat."¹⁶⁷

These recommendations have not been carried out; organizations such as the American Meat Institute, the American Egg Board, and conventional poultry farmers lobby politically against labeling feces as adulterants, although labeling could save lives.

The Consumer Federation of America reports in 2007 that "[t]he USDA is pursuing a program to reduce inspection in one-third of the nation's meat and poultry plants and acknowledges that over 200 plants have not had daily inspections as required by law."¹⁶⁸

Seniors are among the most vulnerable to foodborne illness due to immune systems that are compromised, in part, by poor diets coupled with environmental pollution,

then complicated by numerous valid medications taken daily that may limit nutrient absorption.

U.S. poultry contaminated by Listeria. "Listeria is the most lethal of foodborne pathogens."¹⁶⁹ 20% of those stricken [often the elderly] die."¹⁷⁰ "92% of listeriosis patients are hospitalized." This is "the highest [rate of hospitalization] among foodborne pathogens."¹⁷¹ "The most common manifestation of listeriosis is meningitis."¹⁷²

Listeria "is second only to the total deaths from E. coli O157:H7, a more commonly occurring illness."¹⁷³ Listeria poses such a threat that the FDA approved the use of a viral cocktail, called Intralytix, to be sprayed on poultry to kill the bacteria.

U.S. poultry cold cuts contaminated by Intralytix, a powerful viral cocktail that kills Listeria. The bacteria "Listeria is killed by pasteurization and cooking;"¹⁷⁴ but in "ready-to-eat meat and poultry products,"¹⁷⁵ "such as [chicken or turkey] hot dogs and deli meats, contamination may occur after cooking but before packaging."¹⁷⁶ Listeria thus "poses a problem in meats that are cooked during processing and not cooked again prior to consumption, so it can readily infect foods such as deli meats"¹⁷⁷ like sliced

turkey, including faux (turkey) salami and bologna, especially those without preservatives.

On August 18, 2006, the FDA approved the use of Intralytix "as a food additive to be sprayed on cold cuts to kill *Listeria monocytogenes* before packaging."¹⁷⁸ This includes sliced and unsliced packaged poultry cold cuts, and canned poultry, as well as poultry that is sliced for you at a deli counter. "Intralytix contains six different viral strains designed to kill listeria, the germ that sickens an estimated 2,500 Americans yearly,"¹⁷⁹ (as reported in the meat section.)

Since poultry companies are not required "to inform consumers which products have been treated [with Intralytix] and which have not,"¹⁸⁰ some organic poultry processors (that would have to tell you if there were nitrites in their poultry) may be using Intralytix to protect their otherwise "preservative-free" poultry products. (It is probable that most conventional poultry processors use Intralytix.) If your poultry processor is using Intralytix, you may not contract Listeria, but you would be subject to the dangers (many of which may still be unknown) of ingesting the six viruses included in Intralytix.

U.S. poultry contaminated by antibiotics. Antibiotics are used to ward off disease in poultry. Humans ingest these antibiotics when they consume poultry, and the essential microbial milieu of the human intestinal tract may be disrupted, as the poultry antibiotics kill the microbes necessary for proper human digestion and absorption of nutrients. The human body may become acidic. Poultry tends to make the human body acidic, and the low pH makes us vulnerable to many types of disease, including cancers.

When one is prescribed antibiotics, an antibiotic overload may occur in combination with the ingested poultry (and/or beef) antibiotics. There is a danger of overdosing on the antibiotics, in which case the antibiotics may indiscriminately kill off friendly bacteria that may control disease-causing bacteria. Microbes can mutate into more severe forms in the presence of antibiotics. The body may become ineffective in combatting infection. Strains that become resistant to antibiotic drugs may proliferate and predominate.

U.S. poultry contaminated by Salmonella.

Salmonella "is most widely associated with raw [or undercooked] poultry. The bacteria live in the intestinal tracts of infected animals and are usually transmitted to

humans through eating food contaminated with animal feces.”¹⁸¹ Thorough cooking destroys Salmonella.

Between January 1, 2007 and October 29, 2007¹⁸² “at least 272 people”¹⁸³ in 35 states¹⁸⁴ contracted *Salmonella* infections associated with ConAgra/Banquet frozen pot pies. On October 9, 2007, the USDA-Food Safety and Inspection Service “issued a public health alert”¹⁸⁵ and Con Agra “advised people not to eat its Banquet label as well as private-label turkey and chicken pot pies made at a Marshall, Mo. plant.”¹⁸⁶ “Two days later the company recalled all pot pies, including beef, made at the plant.”¹⁸⁷ It was a Class I High Health Risk Recall¹⁸⁸ that took “millions”¹⁸⁹ of pot pies out of stores. Why did Con Agra wait “two days to recall them, first issuing only a consumer health warning”?¹⁹⁰ “Neither the FDA nor the USDA had the authority to order ConAgra to recall the products. In fact, all food recalls, except for those involving infant formula, are voluntary. Often, the government gets a product recalled by warning the company it could face bad publicity if it does not withdraw the food.”¹⁹¹ And what are we to make of the fact that “a USDA inspector” had been visiting “the Missouri pot pie plant daily”¹⁹² as an overseer?

Now it seems as though ConAgra has realized that the cooking instructions on its Banquet Pot Pies made it impossible for customers to cook the pies correctly. The company now says its previous cooking directions were confusing and that all ConAgra pot pies should be cooked to 165 degrees, a temperature high enough to kill bacteria. New Banquet packages also include more explicit instructions for cooking in microwaves of varying wattages. The old Banquet package said on the front: "Ready in 4 minutes. Microwaveable." On the back, in smaller type, the instructions specified four minutes in "medium" or "high" wattage microwaves and six minutes in "low" wattage ones. ConAgra will also be updating cooking instructions on hundreds of other frozen foods, including the company's popular Healthy Choice and Kid Cuisine lines.¹⁹³

"Salmonella poisoning can cause diarrhea, fever, dehydration, abdominal pain and vomiting."¹⁹⁴ "About 40,000 cases are reported each year in the U.S., but the CDC estimates that the actual number of infections may be 30 times higher because many milder cases are not diagnosed or reported. Most of the 600 deaths salmonella causes each year are among people with weaker immune systems such as the elderly or very young."¹⁹⁵

U.S. poultry contaminated by E. coli. Raw and under-cooked chicken and turkey can carry E. coli. A turkey dinner with dressing can carry E. coli. Everyone used to stuff chickens and turkeys inside the bird, until we were warned to cook stuffing separately. Some estimates claim that at least 20 percent of all turkeys may be contaminated

with E. coli, and since eggs in stuffing may carry salmonella, turkey stuffed in the bird is not an appetizing combination.

Grilled chicken has caused E. coli infection.¹⁹⁶

U.S. poultry contaminated by Campylobacter.

"[A]nywhere from 50 to 80 percent of the raw chicken in the U.S. market is contaminated with campylobacter. Not surprisingly, most cases of campylobacteriosis are associated with handling raw poultry or eating raw or undercooked poultry meat. Even one drop of fluid from contaminated chicken meat can carry enough campylobacter to infect a person."¹⁹⁷

"Campylobacter can be easily spread from bird to bird through contact with infected feces. Thus, when an infected bird is slaughtered, campylobacter in the bird's feces can then be transferred to the meat of that infected bird, as well as other uninfected birds, through contact with the feces. As a result, Campylobacter infection affects more than 2 million persons,"¹⁹⁸ annually.

"Most people who become ill with campylobacteriosis experience diarrhea, cramping, abdominal pain, and fever within two to five days after exposure."¹⁹⁹ "[W]hen

campylobacter has spread to the bloodstream, it causes a serious life-threatening infection. Campylobacter infection also can cause Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a disease that affects the nerves of the body leading to paralysis, and death."²⁰⁰

U.S. poultry contaminated by Avian Influenza (Bird Flu).

Neal Barnard, M.D. warns us that "the threat of bird flu will remain high as long as chickens, ducks, and turkeys are raised in dirty, overcrowded conditions. Like Mad Cow Disease, bird flu is the result of profoundly irresponsible agricultural practices."²⁰¹

David Benatar, writing in the September 2007 issue of *The American Journal of Public Health* predicts, "As the number of human deaths from avian influenza grows and as the disease spreads geographically, fears of a 21st century influenza epidemic or pandemic mount. Even if the disease does not reach epidemic proportions imminently, the fears are nonetheless well-founded."²⁰²

Neal Barnard, M.D. warns us that we, as consumers, can fight Avian Flu by not eating chicken. "Here in the United States," he writes, "the poultry industry likes to claim

that bird flu does not pose a risk because our factory farms supposedly have better sanitation and containment procedures than farms in Asia. But bird flu has actually already struck in this country. In February of 2004, an outbreak of H5N2 ... was detected in a flock of 7,000 chickens in south Texas. In fact, more than 16 outbreaks of H5 and H7 influenza have occurred among poultry in the United States since 1997, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."²⁰³

"These outbreaks were entirely predictable. Collectively, Americans now eat one million chickens per hour. That means that about 9 billion chickens a year are raised for food in the United States. Most live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, with as many as 20,000 birds packed into a single shed. So when one chicken gets sick, disease spreads quickly, making these huge poultry operations the perfect "flu factories."²⁰⁴

"These conditions explain why salmonella and campylobacter are commonly found on chicken products sold in stores. It's also why flocks are often dosed with massive quantities of antimicrobials. But such measures will not stop avian flu."²⁰⁵

“Scientists predict that, sooner or later, H5N1 will mutate and gain the ability to spread easily among humans. That's especially alarming because this strain of avian flu is very aggressive, often causing pneumonia, multiple organ failure, and death. At an October 2005 briefing on bird flu, infectious disease experts told Congressional staffers that, in a worst-case scenario, an avian flu pandemic could kill 40 million Americans.”²⁰⁶

Dr. Barnard believes strongly that “consumers shouldn't wait for industry or the government to take action.”²⁰⁷ Consumers can stop buying poultry now to help prevent a pandemic.

“The obvious solution,” he explains, “is to dry up the reservoir—the chicken flocks where bird flu breeds. If, for a six-month period, a moratorium were placed on raising new chickens, existing flocks would soon be gone, and bird flu would exist only in the occasional migratory bird, posing essentially no risk to humans.”²⁰⁸

“If there were no animal agriculture, there would be no Mad Cow Disease, essentially no salmonella or campylobacter, and virtually no risk of bird flu. This is an easy nutrition prescription, but a difficult one

politically, of course. However, it is the sure way to prevent what could become one of the deadliest diseases the world has ever known."²⁰⁹

Critics decry the U.S. food safety system. "Caroline Smith DeWaal, director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest's food safety division, said the FDA cannot ensure a safe food supply. 'The FDA's current domestic inspection program is a joke,' she said."²¹⁰

"Federal regulators and the food industry say the food safety system needs to be adjusted, not overhauled."²¹¹ "I think the food industry has a very long history of not doing anything on food safety unless it has to," said Marion Nestle, a New York University professor who wrote a book on the subject."²¹² "Critics also complain that the food safety system suffers from a shortage of money and inspectors and inadequate enforcement powers."²¹³

Question 2: Can eating poultry, even organic poultry, cause degenerative diseases?

Chicken increases breast cancer risk. "Many people switch to chicken and fish, believing these to be healthier alternatives to beef. But that is not the case. On the grill, chicken produced more than 10 times the amount of

the carcinogenic heterocyclic amines found in grilled beef. Furthermore, nearly all the HCAs (heterocyclic amines) detected were in the form of PhIP, which has specifically been implicated in breast cancer risk.”²¹⁴

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine Cancer Project Nutritionists determined that although chicken breast, skinless, boneless, grilled, well done, has more than ten times the heterocyclic amines (carcinogens) of grilled steak, pork, salmon, or hamburger,²¹⁵ they all have “alarmingly”²¹⁶ high levels of HCAs.

Fast food grilled chicken contains a dangerous carcinogen. “Every sample of grilled chicken products from seven national restaurant chains tested positive for a dangerous carcinogenic compound called PhIP, prompting the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) to file suit under California’s Proposition 65 to compel the restaurants to warn unsuspecting consumers. PCRM is suing McDonald’s, Burger King, Chick-fil-A, Chili’s, Applebee’s, Outback Steakhouse, and TGI Friday’s in The Superior Court of the State of California for the County of Los Angeles.”²¹⁷

“PCRM commissioned an independent laboratory to test grilled chicken products from California outlets of all seven chains. PhIP was found in every grilled chicken

sample from each restaurant where samples were collected. PhIP is one of a group of carcinogenic compounds called heterocyclic amines (HCAs) that are found in grilled meat. In 2005, the federal government officially added HCAs to its list of carcinogens, and PhIP has been on the California governor's list of chemicals known to cause cancer for more than a decade."²¹⁸

"Grilled chicken can cause cancer, and consumers deserve to know that this supposedly healthy product is actually just as bad for them as high-fat fried chicken," says PCRM president Neal Barnard, M.D. "Even a grilled chicken salad increases the risk of breast cancer, prostate cancer, and other forms of this lethal disease."²¹⁹

U.S. poultry causes heart disease and some types of cancer. "[D]octors have been encouraging people to cut chicken fat out of their diets for many years."²²⁰ "A shift to a healthy plant-based diet can eliminate the intake of animal fat and cholesterol, which dramatically lowers the risk of heart disease and some forms of cancer."²²¹

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