

Health risks associated with raising chickens

Many families raise a small number of chickens, particularly in rural areas. In recent years, however, raising chickens has become a popular hobby for people who live in urban areas as well. Information that promotes raising chickens touts the birds as being good pets, stress relievers, and easy to keep. Most people though, choose to keep flocks because they believe the meat and eggs they grow will be safer and less expensive than store purchased products. Whether they are pets or a source of food, there are some issues that need to be considered before deciding to raise chickens. In addition to the fact that many urban areas will not allow chickens to be raised within city/town limits, keeping chickens poses a potential health risk.

Chickens, turkeys, ducks, and other poultry frequently carry bacteria that can cause illness to you and your family. Baby chicks may be especially prone to shed these germs and cause human illness. Young birds are often shipped several times before they reach a permanent home. Shipment and adapting to new locations causes stress on birds and makes them more likely to shed bacteria in their droppings. While anyone can become ill from exposure to these germs, the risk of infection is especially high for children, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems; for example, people receiving chemotherapy or who are HIV-infected. One of the most important bacteria you need to be aware of is *Salmonella*.

Birds infected with *Salmonella* do not usually appear sick. *Salmonella* lives in the intestine of infected chickens, and can be shed in large numbers in the droppings. Once shed, bacteria can spread across the chicken's body as the bird cleans itself and throughout the environment as the chicken walks around. Therefore, it is especially important to carefully wash hands with soap and water after handling young birds or anything that has come in contact with them. If you ingest *Salmonella*, you may become ill. People accidentally ingest *Salmonella* in many ways, including eating after handling chickens or by touching their hand to their mouth while working with the birds. Typical symptoms of *Salmonella* infection are nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. These symptoms generally develop within one to three days of exposure and may last for up to a week. Individuals with weaker immune systems commonly have more severe infections.

There have been several outbreaks of human *Salmonella* infections resulting from handling baby chicks. See our CDC website:

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4914a1.htm> Many of the outbreaks involved young children and most occurred in the spring around Easter. Some outbreaks have been associated with keeping chicks in the classroom.

I still want to raise chickens. How can I reduce the risks to myself and my family?

1. Keep baby chicks and adult chickens away from persons with weaker immune systems, including the elderly, pregnant women, diabetics, patients receiving chemotherapy, and people who are infected with HIV.
2. Do not keep chickens if a household has children less than five years of age.
3. Make sure that any interaction between chicks or chickens and small children is supervised and that children wash their hands afterwards. Children less than five years of age tend to put their hands and other potentially contaminated objects into their mouths.
4. Supervise hand washing for small children to make sure that it is adequate. See our CDC website for proper hand washing guidelines:
5. Always wash your hands with soap and water after touching chickens or anything in their environment. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol based hand sanitizer. Bacteria on your hands can be easily transferred to objects and other people in your home.
6. Wash contaminated items with hot soapy water or with a mild bleach solution.
7. Do not eat or drink around your chickens.
8. Keep chickens away from food preparation areas.
9. Do not wash items from chicken coops like water and food dishes in the kitchen sink.
10. Do not allow chickens to roam freely around the house.
11. Frequently clean the area where chickens are kept.
12. Visit your physician if you experience abdominal pain, fever, and/or diarrhea.

Additional resources:

Salmonellosis associated with chicks and ducklings ---Michigan and Missouri, Spring 1999. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. April 14, 2000; 49(14):297-29.

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4914a1.htm>

Salmonella serotype Montevideo iInfections associated with chicks - - Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, Spring 1995 and 1996. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. March 21, 1997 / 46(11);237-239.

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00046940.htm>

Salmonella hadar associated with pet ducklings - - Connecticut, Maryland and Pennsylvania, 1991. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. March 20, 1992 / 41(11);185-187. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00016299.htm>