OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

That is a Good Question – Salmonella and Poultry

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Question:
What is Salmonella?

Answer:
The term Salmonella, as it related to food, is used to describe a group of bacteria, which in some cases can cause illness. A person who eats food containing large numbers of these bacteria may become ill and if so the illness will be called salmonellosis.

Question:
Do chickens have Salmonella?

Answer:
Sometimes chickens, just like other animals, can have Salmonella bacteria. These bacteria are usually present in the intestinal tract and occasionally, during the processing procedure; carcasses can be contaminated with the bacteria.

Question:
Where do Salmonella bacteria come from?

Answer:
Salmonella are spread from fecal material of all kinds of animals. Animals pick up the bacteria from the soil or perhaps from contaminated processed feed. The organisms then live in the intestinal tract of the host and may or may not have an effect on the animal. As food animals are slaughtered and processed, there are times when some of the bacteria from the intestines have the opportunity to contaminate the end products.

Question:
If a chicken has Salmonella, is it safe to eat?

Answer:
If the chicken is properly cooked (to an end point temperature of at least 165 degrees F.), there will be little danger. In addition to proper cooking, another safeguard that should be remembered when using all meat items is to wash hands, utensils, and countertops after preparing the meat in order to avoid cross-contamination to other foods.

Question:
How can I buy chickens that do not have Salmonella?

Answer:
There is no way to tell whether the chicken offered for sale in a retail store has any Salmonella bacteria. The secret is to prepare the chicken using good food handling practices, cook it properly, and enjoy a good meal.

Question:
Can pets be carriers of Salmonella?

Answer:
Yes, pets can carry Salmonella and good sanitation where pets are concerned is a must.

Question:
Can turkeys also have Salmonella?

Answer:
Turkeys can also be contaminated with Salmonella and proper thawing and cooking are important.

Question:
How should turkeys be thawed to prevent problems from bacteria?

Answer:
The best method for thawing turkeys is in the refrigerator. Depending on the size, thawing will be completed in 2 or 3 days. For best results the directions on the turkey bag should be followed. Thawing in cold water is a faster method that will still prevent the surface of the turkey from getting too warm and encouraging bacterial growth.

Question:
Should stuffing be cooked inside the turkey?

Answer:
Stuffing can be cooked inside the turkey if cooking begins immediately after stuffing and as long as the stuffing is cooked to a safe end-point temperature (at least 165 degrees F).

Question:
How long will turkey leftovers keep in the refrigerator?

Answer:
Probably turkey leftovers will be safe to eat longer than the flavor will be acceptable. Oxidative rancidity may cause a significant loss in flavor after 2 or 3 days. From a safety standpoint, the length of time depends on temperature of the refrigerator and the length of time after cooking before the food was refrigerated.

Question:
Is the Salmonella problem getting worse?

Answer:
The incidence of illness due to Salmonella is probably not getting worse. What is probably happening is that we correctly identify the causative agent for illnesses more frequently than in the past, and, therefore, we are aware of more situations involving Salmonella.

Question:
If I have salmonellosis, what will happen?

Answer:
Persons who have salmonellosis usually experience chills, fever, headache, exhaustion, diarrhea, and sometimes vomiting. The onset of these symptoms may be 6 to 72 hours (usually 12-24 hours) after ingesting the bacteria. Therefore, a person showing the symptoms of salmonellosis should think about what they had eaten during these time periods. The disease is rarely fatal, but may be more serious for the very young or the elderly.

Question:
Since Salmonella is frequently present, what can consumers do to keep the danger of getting salmonellosis to a minimum?

Answer:
Consumers should always refrigerate perishable groceries (especially meats) as soon as possible after purchasing at the grocery store. When preparing meats, frequent hand washing and cleaning of utensils, counter tops, and cutting boards will minimize the danger of cross-contamination of another food that may not be cooked before serving. An additional safeguard is to rinse utensils in a solution containing 3 tablespoons of household bleach per quart of water. Cutting boards for meat should always be the acrylic type, never wood. The acrylic board can be washed in the dishwasher as an extra precaution. Also, food should always be fully cooked (at least 165 degrees F internal temp) and, if foods are to be held for serving, the temperature needs to be at least 140 degree F.

Question:
Is anything being done to prevent poultry from having Salmonella?

Answer:
Yes, the poultry industry is very much aware of the problem with Salmonella, and new processing procedures are currently being investigated. One processing procedure that is now being used that reduces the possibility of contamination during processing is the use of a dry chilling technique.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Samuel E. Curl, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Dean of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of $.20 per copy. 1003 JA.