

Salmonella is 'no yolk' when raising backyard chickens

A growing interest in raising chickens has enabled coops and nesting birds to spring up in neighborhoods one would not typically associate with chickens.

Sometimes dubbed "urban homesteading" or "urban farming," these homegrown operations enable people to enjoy fresh eggs from the comfort of home. Hen-houses are just another extension of methods to reap the benefits of fresh, local and nonfactory-produced foods.

Although advocates insist that raising chickens on a small scale makes the birds less likely to carry disease than factory-farmed chickens, anyone raising chickens needs to be aware of the potential for disease — particularly salmonella. Also, it's important to care for chickens in a manner that is humane and in line with local laws.

What is salmonella?

Salmonella is a common bacteria that lives in the intestinal tract of humans, other mammals and some birds, including chickens. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that approximately 1.2 million illnesses and 450 deaths are attributed to salmonella annually in the United States. The illness causes diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps between 12 and 72 hours after infection and can last between four and seven days. Salmonella can cause death when not properly treated with antibiotics.

Spreading salmonella

Although humans cannot catch salmonella from chickens the way one would contract a cold, they can catch it through handling or consuming eggs of infected birds. The rural newsletter and farming resource Grit says salmonella can then be transmitted to humans who eat improperly cooked meat or eggs from infected birds or from putting their hands in their mouths after touching chickens or eggs that have come in contact with contaminated rodent or chicken feces.

The elderly, people with weakened immune systems and young children are at the highest risk for salmonella infection than others. Children who help gather eggs and do not thoroughly wash their hands afterward can be at increased risk.

Reducing risk

Maintaining clean conditions and routinely inspecting chickens for good health can help lower the risk of salmonella infection. Chicks and adult chickens that have salmonella may produce loose yellow or green droppings; have a drop in egg production, increased thirst and decreased feed consumption; and show signs of weight loss. Look for rodents in the henhouse, as infected mice or other small rodents may transmit salmonella as well.

Chickens also need safe, roomy clean conditions to remain healthy and content. According to the resource MyPetChicken, a diet of whole grains and seeds also may be associated with decreased salmonella colonies.

Some experts warn against washing eggs as a preventative method. According to a report written by Diane Schivera, an organic livestock specialist for the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, thoroughly cleaning egg shells can remove a protective "bloom" that prevents bacteria from entering eggs. Eggs shouldn't be scrubbed, but some suggest a warm water rinse that will push dirt away from the shell's pores.

Old eggs are more susceptible to bacteria penetration. Storing eggs at room temperature may cause them to degrade faster. Once eggs are gathered, individuals should wash their hands and make sure the eggs are chilled.

Salmonella can be prevented in backyard chicken coops. Plus, it's important to note that risk of infection is very small. The American Egg Board's Egg Safety reference says an average consumer might encounter a contaminated egg once every 84 years.



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Farm to table businesses booming

Consumers' appetites for local foods are growing, and restaurants have taken notice. Today, many local businesses, including farms and restaurants, have mutually exclusive relationships that make it possible for local residents to enjoy nutritious, locally produced meals.

According to the market research firm Packaged Facts, local foods generated \$11.7 billion in sales in 2014 and will climb to \$20.2 billion by 2019. Farm-to-table remains a growing trend that benefits farmers, restaurateurs and consumers. This is evidenced by the rising number of farmers markets cropping up in neighborhoods all across the country, as well as the niche offerings by regional food purveyors. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says that, in the last 20 years, the number of farmers markets has grown by more than 350 percent. Many consumers are now choosing "local" for dining at home and when dining out, and this is making a major impact on the nation's food systems.

Foodies as well as industry experts predict that the local foods movement is a permanent and mainstream trend. In 2014, the National Restaurant Association found the desire for local foods dominated its "Top Food Trends."

The most in-demand foods include locally sourced meats and seafood as well as locally sourced produce. Consumers also are interested in farm/estate-branded foods. Some restaurants are even producing "hyper-local" food, or herbs and produce grown right on the property.

As the demand for local foods has evolved, so has the term "local foods." "Local" can be a wide-ranging term that refers to foods produced in a particular town, state or even region. The 2008 Farm Act defines a "locally or regionally produced agricultural food product" as one that is marketed less than 400 miles from its origin. However, a few states have established more stringent rules that indicate "local" constitutes food produced within

the borders of a state or within a small perimeter of the state.

The growing preference for locally produced foods is great news for the farmers and small food producers that have long fought for footing among the mega-importers. According to the trade publication Produce Business, even though "local" does not place limits on the size of the farm, the growing desire among consumers to go local is benefiting many small and midsized farms, as consumers are increasingly buying foods grown closer to where they live.

In addition to meats, fruits and vegetables, consumers can find many locally made items that expand the potential for farm-to-table. These include, but are not limited to, artisanal cheeses, wines, beer, baked goods, milk and other dairy, and honey.

Local, sustainable foods are in demand, helping not only local restaurants and merchants, but also the small and medium farms that service these establishments.