



The Fuzzy Fluffy Super-Cute Health Threat in your Backyard – Blog by Maryn McKenna

Baby chicks and ducklings and the birds they grow into may not sound like much of a threat. But in addition to the 324 cases they have caused this year (so far; the CDC plans to update the case count in the next two weeks), backyard poultry caused 252 cases of illness last year, 363 cases in 2014, 514 cases in 2013 (including 356 cases caused by one *Salmonella* strain); and 334 in 2012. That is 1,757 cases in 5 years.

“If you ask someone, ‘Can you get *Salmonella* from eating undercooked poultry?’ they are absolutely going to say Yes,” Megin Nichols, a public health veterinarian in the CDC’s foodborne outbreak response and prevention branch, told me. “But if you ask them, ‘Can you get *Salmonella* from touching your backyard chicken?’ they don’t necessarily know that.”

People buy backyard chickens to opt out of an industrial food system they perceive as unhealthy—so it takes some mental gymnastics to confront that the birds providing homegrown eggs (and sometimes meat) might be hazardous too. But, Nichols said, it might also be lack of awareness—that *Salmonella*, which resides in chickens’ guts even when birds look healthy, and exits their bodies in their droppings, can spread all over them as they perch and take dust baths and preen.

“On their feet, on their feathers, on their beaks,” Nichols said. “And in the areas where they live and roam. So people are exposed when they clean the coop or otherwise maintain the poultry environment. But we also see people, especially young children, cuddling and snuggling them and kissing them.”

All of which means the onus is on individuals to protect themselves: owners of live poultry in backyard or schools, people who visit those owners, even people who handle baby chicks in the stores where they are sold. The CDC’s advice is to keep separate clothes and shoes to wear for feeding birds and cleaning their coops; make sure anyone who touches the birds or their area washes their hands right away; and remember that, no matter how adorable they are, backyard poultry are a food source, not a pet. Despite the temptation, they shouldn’t be smooched or snuggled—especially not by young children, whose immature immune systems put them at greater risk of infection.