

Foster Farms Spread Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria around the Nation, Sickening Hundreds



In 2013, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—(CDC) linked Foster Farms, the sixth largest chicken producer in the country¹ and the largest chicken company in the Western U.S.,² to an outbreak of antibiotic-resistant *Salmonella* Heidelberg.³ According to the CDC, 634 people from 29 states and Puerto Rico became ill since March 2013.⁴ However, based on CDC estimates of *Salmonella* infection under-diagnosis rates, the outbreak may have sickened more than 18,000 people.⁵ Nearly 40 percent of those infected had to be hospitalized—double the typical rate⁶—and 15 percent developed blood infections.⁷ By spreading antibiotic resistant bacteria to our communities and kitchens, Foster Farms has contributed to the growing problem of antibiotic resistance, threatening our health. The outbreak was officially deemed to be over by CDC in July, however Foster Farms has not explained why so many *Salmonella* were antibiotic resistant and has refused to disclose detailed information about its antibiotic use.

Scientists agree that when antibiotics are used routinely to raise farm animals, resistant bacteria can breed and spread. Health experts warn that overuse of antibiotics by both humans and livestock now threatens the effectiveness of these essential medicines for treating sick people.⁸ Unfortunately, Foster Farms mostly keeps its antibiotic use secret, so consumers have little information about which antibiotics are being given to its birds and why. Well-managed facilities, not antibiotics, are key to promoting flock health. NRDC is asking Foster Farms to disclose their antibiotics use and publicly commit to using medically-important antibiotics only to treat sick birds and never for non-therapeutic purposes like growth promotion, routine disease prevention, or injection into chicken eggs.



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MEAT+DRUGS
= SUPERBUGS

DANGEROUS BACTERIA HAVE BEEN FOUND ON FOSTER FARMS CHICKEN

In the recent outbreak, five Foster Farms chicken samples from ill people's homes and a store were identified as contaminated with *Salmonella* Heidelberg. Four of these five chicken samples were contaminated with *Salmonella* resistant to at least one antibiotic. Clinical samples from 68 patients in the outbreak were tested and over half were infected by a *Salmonella* resistant to at least one commonly prescribed antibiotic. The CDC noted that people infected with the outbreak strains may face increased risk of hospitalization.⁹

THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME FOSTER FARMS HAS PUT OUR HEALTH AT RISK

This is the second *Salmonella* outbreak traced to Foster Farms in a year and a half, and the third in the last ten years. According to the CDC, 134 people were infected with a strain of *Salmonella* Heidelberg between May 2012 and April 2013; 31 percent were hospitalized. Official investigations pointed to Foster Farms chicken as "the most likely source of this outbreak."¹⁰ In 2004, an outbreak of *Salmonella* Heidelberg infections was also linked to Foster Farms.¹¹ In 2013 alone, USDA inspections of Foster Farms chicken plants in California found multiple violations of rules protecting public health, including 56 instances of fecal material on carcasses.¹²

FOSTER FARMS' STATEMENTS SUGGEST THE COMPANY RELIES ON ANTIBIOTICS

Although Foster Farms' website says the company does not use antibiotics for growth promotion,¹³ other statements by company officials suggest that the company relies on antibiotics to keep its flocks alive. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that Chief veterinarian Robert O'Connor said that Foster Farms uses antibiotics as a preventative measure against illness in its poultry barns and CEO Ron Foster said that without antibiotics his flock would likely get sick, and even die.¹⁴

IT'S TIME FOR FOSTER FARMS TO COME CLEAN ON ANTIBIOTICS

Just as people don't generally take antibiotics to avoid getting sick, neither should farm animals. Poultry producers can and should rely on improved sanitation, reduced crowding, better breeding, vaccinations, improved nutrition and other best practices.¹⁵ NRDC calls on Foster Farms to help keep antibiotics working for people by disclosing its antibiotics use and publicly committing to only use medically important antibiotics to treat sick birds and never for routine, nontherapeutic purposes.

THE *SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE* REPORTED THAT FOSTER FARMS CEO RON FOSTER SAID THAT WITHOUT ANTIBIOTICS HIS FLOCK WOULD LIKELY GET SICK, AND EVEN DIE.

Experts Are Sounding The Alarm

Medical experts have warned about the livestock industry's misuse and overuse of medically relevant antibiotics. In a recent report on the threat of antibiotic resistance to human health, the CDC stated: "Up to half of antibiotic use in humans and much of antibiotic use in animals is unnecessary and inappropriate and makes everyone less safe."¹⁶ Underscoring the threat of farm animals serving as "carriers" of resistant bacteria,¹⁷ the CDC called for more responsible use of antibiotics by meat and poultry producers.

Eighty percent of all antibiotics sold in the U.S. are for use in livestock production.¹⁸ Many are administered without a prescription and used on animals that are not sick.¹⁹ Instead, they are mixed with food and water to promote growth and help animals survive crowded and unsanitary conditions.²⁰ Fed to animals routinely, antibiotics kill weak bacteria, leaving behind those that are drug resistant.²¹ These "superbugs" travel off the farms into our communities, spreading through meat, air, soil, water, and people in contact with farm animals.²² Resistant bacteria can also transfer resistance traits to other bacteria.²³

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* United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Antibiotic Resistance Threats in the United States*, 2013, 2013, p. 31, www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/threat-report-2013/.

SALMONELLA HEIDELBERG OUTBREAK: 2013 – 2014

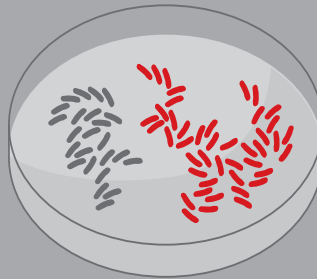


634
PEOPLE HAVE
FALLEN ILL

38%
OF THESE
CASES WERE
HOSPITALIZED

15%
DEVELOPED
BLOOD
INFECTIONS

These percentages were calculated based upon the subset of cases for which there was available information in August of 2014.



CLINICAL SAMPLES FROM 68 PATIENTS IN THE OUTBREAK WERE TESTED AND TWO-THIRDS WERE INFECTED BY A SALMONELLA RESISTANT TO AT LEAST ONE COMMONLY PRESCRIBED ANTIBIOTIC.

2013 *Salmonella* Outbreak linked to Foster Farms

In October 2013, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced an outbreak of *Salmonella* Heidelberg that they linked to the consumption of Foster Farms chicken. As of August 2014, 634 people had fallen ill, 38 percent of cases were hospitalized, and 15 percent developed blood infections. Of 68 isolates tested from patients, CDC reports that 44 (65 percent) exhibited resistance to at least one antibiotic. CDC notes that, while the particular antibiotics the bacteria were resistant to are not used to treat *Salmonella* infections, antibiotic resistance in general may be associated with an increased risk of hospitalization.

In addition, based on CDC estimates of *Salmonella* infection under-diagnosis rates, the outbreak may have sickened more than 18,000 people.^a

Source: United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Multistate Outbreak of Multidrug-Resistant Salmonella Heidelberg Infections Linked to Foster Farms Brand Chicken*, July 31, 2014, Final Update, www.cdc.gov/salmonella/heidelberg-10-13/.

^a CDC estimates that for every reported case of *Salmonella* infection, 29.3 cases go undiagnosed, and uses this multiplier to create more comprehensive estimates of foodborne illness in the U.S. The figure cited in the text was obtained by multiplying the total number of reported illnesses in the most recent *Salmonella* outbreak (634) by 29.3 = 18,576. See United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Foodborne Illness Acquired in the United States – Major Pathogens*, Volume 17, Number 1-January 2011, Table 2, <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/17/1/p1-1101-t2.htm>.



Salmonella bacteria

Endnotes

- 1 Based on million heads of chicken slaughtered per week. Thornton, Gary, "Top U.S. Broiler Companies: 2013 Profiles," Watt Poultry USA, March 2013.
- 2 As reported in the San Francisco Chronicle, Foster Farms holds nearly 65% of the West Coast broiler chicken market: <http://www.sfgate.com/business/article/Company-linked-to-salmonella-outbreak-IDs-source-4908257.php>.
- 3 November 19, 2013, update to <http://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/heidelberg-10-13/>. Isolates collected from ill persons were resistant to combinations of the following antibiotics: ampicillin, chloramphenicol, gentamicin, kanamycin, streptomycin, sulfisoxazole, and tetracycline. See United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Multistate Outbreak of Multidrug-Resistant Salmonella Heidelberg Infections Linked to Foster Farms Brand Chicken*, (Final Update), www.cdc.gov/salmonella/heidelberg-10-13/. Accessed November 17, 2014.
- 4 As with any outbreak, it is likely that the number of people infected far exceeds the number of reported cases. See "Foodborne Illness—Major Pathogens, Expanded Tables" http://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/PDFs/11_228412_pitts_factsheet_table2_remediated.pdf. Accessed 1/3/2014. United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Multistate Outbreak of Multidrug-Resistant Salmonella Heidelberg Infections Linked to Foster Farms Brand Chicken*, (Final Update), www.cdc.gov/salmonella/heidelberg-10-13/. Accessed November 17, 2014.
- 5 CDC estimates that for every reported case of *Salmonella* infection, 29.3 cases go undiagnosed, and uses this multiplier to create more comprehensive estimates of foodborne illness in the U.S. The figure cited in the text was obtained by multiplying the total number of reported illnesses in the most recent *Salmonella* outbreak (524) by 29.3 = 15,353. See United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Foodborne Illness Acquired in the United States – Major Pathogens*, Volume 17, Number 1-January 2011, Table 2, <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/17/1/p1-1101-t2.htm>.
- 6 Per CDC spokesman John O'Connor. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Antibiotic Resistance Ups Salmonella Hospitalizations: CDC*, October 9, 2013, <http://healthfinder.gov/News/Article.aspx?id=680974>.
- 7 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Food and Drug Administration, Center for Veterinary Medicine, *2011 Summary Report on Antimicrobials Sold or Distributed for Use in Food-Producing Animals*, 2011, www.fda.gov/downloads/ForIndustry/UserFees/AnimalDrugUserFeeActADUFA/UCM338170.pdf (accessed October 1, 2013). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Food and Drug Administration, Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, *Drug Use Review* (2012), www.fda.gov/downloads/Drugs/DrugSafety/InformationbyDrugClass/UCM319435.pdf.
- 8 Ellen Silbergeld, Jay Graham, and Lance Price, "Industrial food animal production, antimicrobial resistance, and human health," *Annual Review of Public Health* 29 (2008): 151-169. Bonnie Marshall and Stuart Levy, "Food animals and antimicrobials: Impacts on human health," *Clinical Microbiology Reviews* 24 (2011): 718-733. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Antibiotic Resistance Threats in the United States*, 2013, 2013, www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/threat-report-2013/.
- 9 United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Multistate Outbreak of Multidrug-Resistant Salmonella Heidelberg Infections Linked to Foster Farms Brand Chicken*, (Final Update), www.cdc.gov/salmonella/heidelberg-10-13/. Accessed November 17, 2014.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Outbreak of Salmonella Heidelberg Infections Linked to a Single Poultry Producer—13 States, 2012–2013*, July 12, 2013, http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6227a3.htm?s_cid=mm6227a3_e.
- 12 See Notices of Intended Enforcement from Yudhbir Sharma, DVM, District Manager, FSIS, USDA, to Ron Foster, CEO Foster Farms, October 7, 2013, regarding establishments 6137 (34 violations), 6137A (12 violations), and 7632 (10 violations).
- 13 Foster Farms policy goes on to state "[a]ny antibiotics used by Foster Farms for treatment are approved by the USDA and FDA for use in poultry and are prescribed by and monitored under the supervision of a veterinarian. Foster Farms observes all regulated antibiotic withdrawal times prior to processing." <http://www.fosterfarms.com/about/raise.asp>, accessed 11/4/2013.
- 14 *San Francisco Chronicle*; "Company linked to Salmonella outbreak ID's source," updated 10/18/2013. <http://www.sfgate.com/business/article/Company-linked-to-salmonella-outbreak-IDs-source-4908257.php>.
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