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*Clover Connection*

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**Backyard poultry producers should protect themselves from salmonella**

A Texas A&M AgriLife Extension expert said residential poultry producers should take precautions against salmonella exposure after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported the highest number of cases linked to live poultry on record.

The popularity of backyard poultry flocks has increased over the last several years, but the rising number of salmonella outbreaks shows there is continued need for public education to warn producers about the risks and ways to avoid exposure through basic hygiene, according to Dr. Craig Coufal, a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service poultry specialist, College Station.

Exposure to salmonella from live poultry can be prevented if producers take the necessary precautions. “We just want to reiterate the point that salmonella continues to be a problem among producers,” he said. “The numbers are going up, and it’s an indicator that there are more birds and more exposure to humans.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 1,120 cases of salmonella linked to poultry in 48 states, including 58 cases in Texas. The infections resulted in 249 hospitalizations and one death.

In 2016, the Centers for Disease Control reported 895 cases of salmonella infections, including three deaths and 209 hospitalizations. According to the CDC, 28 percent of those infected were children 5-years-old or younger. Outbreaks were traced back to contact with live poultry, such as chicks and ducklings, according to the CDC.

Most chickens carry some form of the more than 2,000 types of salmonella, Coufal said. It’s a naturally occurring part of their microbial flora. Birds are carriers so they typically don’t show signs of the bacteria.

Despite the presence of salmonella on poultry, residents with backyard flocks for egg and meat production can greatly reduce the risk of infection by taking precautions, Coufal said.

Petting or holding live birds, handling eggs or working in areas frequented by birds, such as the coop, can expose people to salmonella.

“My gut tells me it’s the fact that there are a lot of new flock owners, people who just don’t know about the risks,” he said. “They don’t know they should wash their hands after picking up or petting birds, handling eggs or working in the coop. They come in and touch the rim of a glass or handle food and then get sick.” In most cases, soap and warm water is the solution, Coufal said.

He also stated that the high percentage of young children exposed to salmonella during the outbreak highlights how the bacteria can be spread. “Kids love to play with baby chicks and ducklings,” he said. “If they then put their fingers in their mouths or touch food without washing their hands, they are putting the bacteria directly into their system, possibly resulting in illness.”

Practicing good biosecurity can help protect backyard flocks from exposure to salmonella and other bacteria and viruses, Coufal said. Producers shouldn’t share equipment or materials with other producers. If sharing equipment, such as a coop, is necessary, it should be cleaned thoroughly with a bleach-based cleaner.

Visiting neighboring poultry production areas could also lead to exposure of pathogens if precautions are not taken to prevent transmission, such as changing shoes or clothes, Coufal said. Coufal also recommends backyard producers purchase their chicks, ducklings and other fowl from reputable sources. “When you buy birds at a flea market or in the want ads, you really don’t know where they are coming from,” he said. “There are no assurances of testing for diseases or the health status of the bird.”

Coufal recommends purchasing birds from hatcheries or breeders certified through the National Poultry Improvement Plan. NPIP certification ensures birds are from healthy breeder flocks tested for severe diseases. However, NPIP certification does not guarantee birds are completely free of salmonella. “We want people to enjoy their backyard flocks,” Coufal said. “We just want them to be educated about salmonella and easy ways to avoid infection.”

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