

Experts: Don't worry about holiday turkeys carrying avian flu

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After reading headlines and hearing news reports almost every day for months about the spread of avian flu in Asia and other regions, it's understandable that consumers in the United States are questioning the wisdom of preparing the traditional stuffed turkey for the upcoming holidays.

As long as they roast their turkeys properly and observe safe food-handling practices, Americans don't have to worry about avian flu this year, according to poultry experts in the College of Agricultural Sciences.

"While avian flu has been observed in people and birds on other continents, it isn't something for Americans to get overly concerned about now," said Mike Hulet, associate professor of poultry science. "Avian flu hasn't even entered this country, but even if it had, as long as a turkey is properly cooked, there is nothing to worry about. That goes for all bacteria and viruses.

"Also, the birds are thoroughly processed and examined," Hulet added. "So health issues shouldn't worry any shopper as long as they cook a turkey at the right temperature for the proper amount of time."

Gregory Martin, an extension poultry educator in Lancaster County, has been asked by many consumers recently about the safety of poultry meat and eggs. Some people are anxious about preparing their Thanksgiving turkey, he noted. "There is no danger of acquiring bird flu from properly cooked poultry or poultry products," he said. "In the United States, there is virtually no chance of encountering meat from chickens or turkeys infected with influenza, but good food-handling practices, such as thoroughly washing hands and preparation surfaces with warm soapy water after contact with raw poultry, would greatly reduce the chance of any food-related disease."

Martin also recommends that consumers purchase a quality food thermometer to make sure poultry products are cooked to the proper internal temperature. Food safety experts recommend that the internal temperature should reach 170 degrees in the breast, 180 degrees in the thigh and 160 to 165 degrees in the center of the stuffing and that unused portions are refrigerated promptly.

Hulet pointed out that advice for preparing the perfect turkey for Thanksgiving dinner is available online. "If consumers go to the site eatturkey.com/ owned and run by the National Turkey Federation, they can get expert opinions on cook times and nutritional facts," he said. "In

addition, you can learn helpful tips to give you and your family the best-tasting Thanksgiving turkey possible."

With Thanksgiving almost here, shoppers might be fretting about turkey availability. But Hulet believes they shouldn't be. "As always, we have a great supply of frozen birds," he said. "The only area you might see a lower supply in is with fresh birds. This isn't unusual, though, since the fresh birds can only be stored for so long. But anyone looking to get a fresh turkey, or who already has one reserved, should be expecting to pay a premium price of greater than 99 cents per pound."

Avian flu, which is naturally occurring, is highly contagious between birds and can infect anything from waterfowl to domesticated chickens and turkeys. It can cause serious illness in the birds and often is fatal.

Considerable effort has been made to prevent the introduction of Asian bird flu into the U.S. poultry industry and to prepare a response if it were to be introduced into the country, according to Martin. "Banning the importation of birds and bird products from the infected areas and other importation controls are the federal government's first line of defense," he said. "Virtually all chicken and turkey sold in the United States is domestically produced."

Whenever the U.S. poultry industry encountered strains of avian flu in the past, according to Martin, infected flocks were humanely destroyed and disposed of through environmentally sound methods. Monitoring and surveillance for avian influenza, which includes Asian bird flu, is performed constantly within the poultry industry.

Pennsylvania ranks eighth in overall turkey production in the country. The state's three main turkey suppliers -- Pilgrim's Pride, Empire Kosher and Jandl Turkeys -- raise most of the 12 million birds produced each year statewide.

Source: Penn State

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