

Turkey: things you have to know before Thanksgiving

November 10 2005



It's just about time for Thanksgiving. And while many of us love to sit down to a wonderful turkey dinner with our family and friends, few give much thought to where that turkey comes from.

In fact, today's turkey is something of a miracle that has been developed and bred to meet the tastes of modern-day Americans. University of Maryland Newsdesk recently talked with Prof. Nickolas Zimmermann about today's turkey, where it comes from, and a major challenge poultry farmers could be facing in the future.

Q: Is the turkey we put on the table today at Thanksgiving considerably different than the one the Pilgrims found out in the wild?

Turkeys in the days of the Pilgrims were similar to the wild turkeys that are now abundant in most states of the nation. They have dark plumage and can fly. Modern turkeys have been bred to have large breast muscles, desired by consumers. Modern turkeys also have been bred to have white feathers, so that pigment from dark feathers does not blemish the skin. The selection process has been so successful that modern turkeys are too heavy to fly under most circumstances. That has also reduced their reproductive efficiency.

Q: Are wild turkeys smarter than today's farm-grown turkey?

Wild turkeys grow up in woodlands where only the alert survive. At any moment a fox or a hawk could threaten their life and they must constantly look for food. In comparison, modern turkeys are couch potatoes; food and water are always close and they are safe from predators.

Q: Is artificial insemination the only way farmers can really produce the "modern" turkey of today?

Not entirely. Modern large-breasted turkeys are able to mate in the traditional way. But this is a clumsy act for a large-breasted turkey, and insemination is hit or miss; mostly miss. This results in a high proportion of eggs not being fertile, thus fewer poults are hatched. Artificial insemination insures that sperm are present to fertilize the hen's egg and increase the number of poults hatched.

Q: We've heard a lot about avian flu of late. Will it ever have an impact on our Thanksgiving turkey?

All animals are subject to getting the flu, including turkeys. Hundreds of types influenza virus exist and most are mild, but on rare occasions mutate into lethal strains. Flocks found to be infected are destroyed to prevent the possibility of lethal mutations that sicken other poultry. The "bird flu" scare is the result of a very rare mutation that infects not only birds, but sometimes people. This is the Avian Influenza (H5N1) that has only been observed in the far east. It has never been in North America. The greatest concern is that H5N1, while infecting a person will mutate again, allowing people to catch it from each other. This has not happened, it may never happen or it could happen today. [See this poultry industry web site](#) for more information. The key point is that our poultry supply is safe and wholesome to eat.

Source: University of Maryland

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