

State epidemiologists warn that live poultry can carry salmonella

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Although salmonella infection usually is known as a food-borne illness, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment recently warned that people also can get infected by handling live poultry or coming in contact with poultry cages or bedding.

According to the CDC, 2012 saw the largest outbreak of human salmonella infections linked to backyard flocks in a single year.

Backyard flocks may have salmonella germs in their droppings and on their bodies (feathers, feet and beaks), even when they appear healthy and clean. While it usually doesn't make the birds sick, salmonella can cause serious illness when it is passed to people.

State epidemiologists also warned that salmonellosis outbreaks from chicks and ducklings often increase during the spring as the demand rises for baby birds as gifts or to raise for eggs. They warned parents and caregivers to keep children 5 years of age and younger from handling young birds, such as chicks, ducklings, goslings and baby turkeys.

"As adorable as baby chicks and ducklings are, it is not good for young children to handle them because of the health risk," said Alicia Cronquist, department epidemiologist.

In past years, the department's Disease Control and Environmental Epidemiology Division has investigated outbreaks of salmonella infection that were associated with exposure to baby birds. Most cases were among children under 5 years of age. Children are particularly at risk of illness because their immune systems are still developing. They are more likely to put their fingers or other items in their mouths and they are less likely than adults to wash their hands.

Cronquist advised people to follow these simple steps to protect themselves and others from getting sick:

—Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water right after touching live poultry or anything in the area where live poultry live and roam. Adults should supervise hand-washing for young children.

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—Clean any equipment or materials associated with raising or caring for live poultry, such as cages or feed and water containers, outside the house. Do not wash the cage or any related equipment in the kitchen sink or with a kitchen sink scrubber.

—Never bring live poultry inside the house, in bathrooms or especially in areas where food or drink is prepared, served or stored, such as kitchens or outdoor patios.

Cronquist said salmonella infection symptoms usually begin about one to three days after exposure and include diarrhea, fever and stomach pain. Illness usually lasts four to seven days, and most people recover without medical treatment.

However, in some people, the symptoms may be so severe that treatment or hospitalization is needed. Infants, elderly people and those with weakened immune systems are more likely than others to develop severe illness.

When severe infection occurs, salmonella may spread from the intestines to the bloodstream and then to other body sites and can cause death unless the person is treated promptly with antibiotics.

For more information, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/media/dpk/2013/dpk-live-poultry-salmonella.html>

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