

**Remarks of Caroline Smith DeWaal
Director of Food Safety
for the Center for Science in the Public Interest
at the National Press Club**

**Washington, D.C.
November 21, 2002**

Thanks once again to the National Press Club, Bill McCarren and Jim Swenson for inviting CSPI to talk turkey about holiday food safety.

This year we have really exciting news! For the first time, consumers can purchase the safest possible turkeys, based on actual government test data. And the turkeys we recommend you search out this year are from plants that did the impossible (or so we were told) and reduced their *Salmonella* levels to less than two percent. That's incredible! And it clearly shows that the poultry industry is capable of reducing hazards in their products to negligible levels, despite years of saying that it couldn't be done.

Last year, we announced that we planned to file a Freedom of Information Act request with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to obtain *Salmonella* results from turkey plants. Three months later, USDA sent us the results of its tests on turkeys from 38 plants located throughout the U.S. Approximately 56 turkey samples were collected in each plant between late March and mid-October 2001 and tested for *Salmonella*. Though this sampling program is quite modest, it is the best source we have today for comparing the performance of different companies.

Salmonella in food is responsible for 1.3 million illnesses, 15,000 hospitalizations, and over 500

deaths a year.

Here are USDA's results:

Half the companies were already doing well as USDA found *Salmonella* in fewer than nine percent of the turkeys tested. Even more exciting, eight plants were doing the "impossible" with only one bird tested containing *Salmonella*. One plant even accomplished the "incredible" as no *Salmonella* was found on any of its turkeys tested.

But fourteen plants need more work as 10 to 20 percent of their turkeys had *Salmonella*. Though this might meet existing government standards, these plants could clearly improve. Perhaps they should get some guidance from the plants that are doing significantly better.

The final five plants had really poor results, as 25 to 50 percent of their turkeys tested positive for *Salmonella*. Lucky for us, four out of five of these poor performers don't produce whole bird turkeys traditionally used for Thanksgiving. Instead they cook these turkeys and turn them into luncheon meat or other processed turkey products. Several companies in this group have written to us to say how much their food-safety practices have improved since the government tests were taken last year. Kudos to these companies for taking steps to reduce their *Salmonella* rates. However, we won't know for sure how successful they were unless the government does another round of *Salmonella* tests in turkey plants. Unfortunately, USDA has not announced plans to conduct another survey.

So here is what we recommend. This year you can purchase a turkey from a plant with an excellent safety record – and much lower *Salmonella* levels.

First place goes to Perdue Foods in Washington, Indiana. This was the only plant to get a

perfect score – the government found no *Salmonella* on any of the 56 turkeys that it tested from this plant. Perdue Turkeys gets our BEST BIRD award this Thanksgiving.

Close behind, with only one positive finding for *Salmonella*, are eight plants that sell a variety of products. Three of these plants produce only one name brand, including Golden Legacy, Northern Pride, or Zacky Farms. In other cases though you can't go on brand names alone, because more than one plant produces a particular brand of turkey. For example, if you buy a Butterball Turkey, you might get a bird from the plant in Huntsville, Arkansas – one of the cleanest plants. But if you don't look carefully, that Butterball might be produced in Wallace, North Carolina or in Cathage, Missouri, plants that are producing turkeys many times more likely to be contaminated with *Salmonella*.

CSPI has prepared this Field Guide to Safer Turkeys, to help consumers pick the safest birds. This list will help consumers figure out whether the Butterball, Wampler, Jennie-O or Honeysuckle White turkey they want to purchase comes from the cleanest plants. Just print off a copy from our website, WWW.CSPINET.ORG, and go to the store armed with the plant numbers. Check for the number in or near the USDA seal of approval. If it is not there, you can also ask a store clerk to help you find the plant numbers.

This year, you have the opportunity to choose a turkey produced in one of the cleanest turkey plants in America. It might take a little more effort, but it would be worth it to get a cleaner, safer turkey. And that is a great place to start as you begin your feast preparations.

But remember, low *Salmonella* doesn't mean no *Salmonella*. Worse yet, USDA has no limit on the amount of *Campylobacter* in poultry, a hazard that causes nearly two million illnesses per year. So, even after purchasing your safer turkey, it is vital that you follow these

safe-handling steps:

- **Contain your turkey.** Keep your uncooked turkey double-wrapped in the refrigerator or freezer. Raw turkey juices can spread bacteria, so make certain that when you are handling the turkey, your counters are clear. Everything that has touched the raw or partially cooked turkey, such as hands, thermometers, or other implements, needs to be scrubbed thoroughly with warm, soapy water.
- **Don't let your turkey become a bacteria bomb.** Defrosting on the counter allows bacteria to grow quickly on the surface of the frozen turkey while the interior is still thawing. To prevent this, frozen turkeys should be thawed in the refrigerator. Move your turkey to the refrigerator on Sunday (20 pounder) or Monday (15 pounder).
- **Don't play Russian roulette; use a thermometer.** The best place to check the turkey's temperature is in the thickest part of the thigh, away from the bone. Checking it in several places is even better. When the thermometer reads 180°F in the thigh, your turkey is done. We recommend that you use a thermometer even if your turkey has a pop-up timer. They're not always accurate.
- **Use germ warfare inside and out.** Warm, moist stuffing inside a turkey is a great place for bacteria to grow. If you aren't sure that the stuffing has reached 165° F, then be sure to thoroughly heat the stuffing on the stove after removing it from the turkey. Or, better yet, cook your stuffing on the stove instead of inside the bird.

While *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* are the best-known hazards for turkey consumers, they aren't the only ones. How you handle the food after it's cooked is equally important. The

hazards linked to improper cooling of fully cooked food cause an estimated 435,000 food poisoning illnesses annually. But leftover hazards can be avoided by remembering one simple formula:

- **2 hours:** Move food from the oven to the feast to the refrigerator in two hours.
- **2 inches:** Store food at a shallow depth to speed chilling.
- **4 days:** Eat refrigerated leftovers in four days. Freeze leftovers that you want to keep longer.

Following the 2 hours/2 inches/4 days formula for leftovers at holiday time and all year long could help prevent hundreds of thousands of food-related illnesses each year.

Whether you are a first-time holiday cook or an old hand, it never hurts to review the basics of safe holiday food preparation. Everyone at CSPI hopes you enjoy a happy and healthy Thanksgiving holiday!