



Microbe Monthly

Communicable Disease Report

November 2008

El Paso County Department
of Health & Environment

The Holiday Turkey—Friend or Foe?

The approach of Thanksgiving and the holiday season brings with it an increased risk of foodborne illness. A well-known potential culprit is the holiday turkey, which may be a source of enteric pathogens—including *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *Listeria* and *E. coli*. According to the American Turkey Federation, about 235 million turkeys were consumed in the U.S. in 2007, with about 46 million of those being eaten at Thanksgiving and 22 million at Christmas.



The USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is the agency responsible for assuring that the nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry and egg products is safe, wholesome, correctly labeled and packaged. FSIS randomly test turkeys for *Salmonella* and *E. coli* but not for other organisms, so even at its best the inspection system will not detect all contamination. Consumers should be advised to always consider their turkey potentially contaminated and follow proper handling and cooking measures in order to protect themselves from any cross contamination. A dramatic example of holiday turkey gone bad is a 1995 Nevada outbreak in which all 7 persons who ate food from a Thanksgiving dinner at a private home became ill with salmonellosis. Two of those persons were hospitalized for dehydration, and a third person died from severe dehydration and sepsis. Turkey and stuffing were the only foods eaten by all seven ill persons. The analysis revealed that the turkey was improperly handled and cooked (MMWR, Nov 22, 1996).

In recent months, CDC has investigated outbreaks of foodborne illness that were caused by bacteria in spinach, peanut butter, frozen pizza, frozen pot pies, frozen beef patties, tomatoes and jalapeno peppers. With increased media coverage of these events, many consumers are becoming more aware of the ongoing importance of food safety. But holiday gatherings are important opportunities to remind both the experienced chef and the novice cook about food safety issues when thawing, preparing, stuffing and cooking their turkeys. Additional information regarding safe turkey handling is available at:

www.cdc.gov/Features/TurkeyTime/

El Paso County Disease Trends

In October 2008, 46 communicable diseases were reported and investigated: *Campylobacter* (3), *Cryptosporidiosis* (1), *Giardia* (6), chronic hepatitis B (8), invasive pneumococcal disease (5), *Salmonella* (4), STEC (shiga-toxin producing *E. coli*) (1), varicella (8) and viral meningitis (6).

Also in October, the Communicable Disease Program received 3 possible foodborne illness complaints, bringing the year-to-date total to 123 complaints.

Thus far in 2008, there have been 38 illness outbreaks reported: 8 influenza in long-term care facilities (LTCFs), 10 norovirus/gastrointestinal in LTCFs, 14 outbreaks associated with retail food establishments, 5 associated with schools and 1 in a home.

County	Number of Foodborne Illness Outbreaks, 2008 YTD
El Paso	15
Arapahoe	6
Boulder	5
Denver	3
Jefferson	4
Weld	4
Colorado (multi-state)	3
Total reported CO outbreaks	50 Statewide

Hot Topics—State and National

E. coli O157 Outbreak May Be Associated With Exposure To Elk Droppings

The Jefferson County Department of Health and Environment and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment are investigating an outbreak of *E. coli* O157 infections among children in the Evergreen mountain area. The state public health laboratory reported that specimens obtained from elk droppings in the Evergreen area have tested positive for the same strain of *E. coli* O157 bacteria that was identified in the children. Eight illnesses have been identified among children ages 4-12 years. Illness among the children has occurred sporadically throughout the summer and early fall, beginning in July and most recently in late October. Most of the ill children had exposure to elk droppings during outdoor recreation, at local fields, in parks or around their homes.

Contact Information

CD/TB Program
 Weekday Hours 719-578-3220
 After-Hours Emergency 719-385-9622
Immunizations 719-578-3272
Environmental Health 719-575-8636
STD Program 719-578-3296
 (Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Hep C, HIV/AIDS, Blood-borne Exposures)
Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
 Weekday Hours 303-692-2700
 After Hours 303-370-9395