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Talking Turkey: 9 out of 10 retail turkey samples contaminated with fecal bacteria



Ben Franklin's tree-perching "Bird of Courage" has been transformed into a flightless butterball so top-heavy they are physically incapable of mating (necessitating artificial insemination). Turkeys are bred to grow so fast, a group of veterinary researchers [concluded](#), "they are on the verge of structural collapse."

Wild turkeys grow to be [8 pounds](#) in the time turkeys raised for meat reach a slaughter weight of [28 pounds](#). Their skeletons cannot

adequately support such weight, leading to degenerative hip disease, spontaneous fractures, and up to [20% mortality](#) due to lameness in problem flocks. An editor at the leading U.S. agribusiness weekly [wrote](#):

Turkeys have been bred to grow faster and heavier but their skeletons haven't kept pace, which causes 'cowboy legs.' Commonly, the turkeys have problems standing...and fall and are trampled on or seek refuge under feeders, leading to bruises and downgradings as well as culled or killed birds.

Commercial breeds may outgrow their cardiovascular systems as well as their skeletons. Modern-day turkeys have been bred to grow so fast that up to 6% simply [drop dead](#) from acute heart failure at just a few months of age. It still may make good economic sense in the end, though. In fact, the sudden deaths of turkeys have been regarded by [some](#) in industry as a sign of "good flock health and fast growth rate as in the case of sudden death syndrome (flip-over) in broiler chickens." As one producer [wrote](#), "Aside from the stupendous rate of growth...the sign of a good meat flock is the number of birds dying from heart attacks."

Two prominent poultry researchers offer the following economic [analysis](#):

The situation has forced growers to make a choice. Is it more profitable to grow the biggest bird possible and have increased mortality due to heart attacks, ascites, and leg problems, or should birds be grown slower so that birds are smaller, but have fewer heart, lung and skeletal problems?...A large portion of growers' pay is based on the pound of saleable meat produced, so simple calculations suggest that it is better to get the weight and ignore the mortality.

This raises both [animal welfare](#) and food safety concerns. The public health implications arise from a physiological trade-off between maximal muscle mass and optimal immune function. As detailed in a review I just had [published](#) in an international agriculture journal, there appears to be an inverse relationship between disease resistance and growth rates of farm animals accelerated by selective breeding or genetic engineering. This may explain why turkey products have been found to be among the most contaminated of meats.

Every year the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tests the U.S. retail meat supply for the presence of fecal bacteria. When consumers think of manure in ground meat, hamburger comes to mind, but the latest [survey](#) found only 7 out of 10 samples of beef positive for *E. coli*, compared to more like 9 out of 10 samples of turkey, including the [type](#) blamed for human [urinary tract infections](#). Turkey also had the highest contamination rates for *Enterococcus faecalis* and multidrug resistant *Enterococcus faecium*. For a video on last year's CDC report, see [Fecal Bacteria Survey](#).

In today's NutritionFacts.org video-of-the-day, [U.S. Meat Supply Flying At Half Staph](#), I profile the landmark new report this year [Multidrug-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus in U.S. Meat and Poultry](#) that found that supermarket turkey was the meat most contaminated by staph bacteria (77% of turkey samples) and multidrug-resistant staph (79% of turkey staph), including the dreaded MRSA, the "superbug" now responsible for killing [more](#) Americans than AIDS. Turkey products also beat out other meats for contamination with *Clostridium difficile*, as reviewed in [Toxic Megacolon Superbug](#).

The [Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production](#), which included a former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture,

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concluded that "The present system of producing food animals in the United States...presents an unacceptable level of risk to public health...." [Tomorrow's video-of-the-day](#) will explore the public health implications of industrial pork production, and on Thanksgiving Eve I'll review the latest on [MRSA in U.S. Retail Meat](#).

-Michael Greger, M.D.

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[Bradley Ray](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 11:37 am](#)

Oh WOW!! Turkey doesn't seem so healthy now:-/

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Rating: +1 (from 3 votes)



[Lisamarie Dean](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 2:22 pm](#)

It never was healthy. However it's REALLY not now, no.

[Log in to Reply](#)

Rating: +2 (from 4 votes)



[Deb Kimmel](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 12:21 pm](#)

So where can we find a turkey that isn't raised like this? How will we know what to look for?

[Log in to Reply](#)

Rating: +4 (from 8 votes)



[Lisamarie Dean](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 2:24 pm](#)

Very simple, Deb. You either go into a Whole Foods or go online at <http://www.tofurky.com> and you get a TOFURKY or a celebration roast or something like that along with all the usual fixings—just make sure it's the meatless kind, and that's the BEST thing you can do as well as not supporting animal cruelty!

[Log in to Reply](#)

Rating: +4 (from 14 votes)



[Sarah Whithed](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 4:23 pm](#)

Deb, it may be too late for this year but there are small organic farms that raise turkeys free range and humanely. Even though their lives are short they live the way nature intended. You will be able to taste the difference. Think ahead to next Thanksgiving and consider looking into it now.

[Log in to Reply](#)

Rating: -1 (from 5 votes)



[Deb Kimmel](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 5:20 pm](#)

Thanks Sarah. I wasn't really planning on hosting Thanksgiving so I didn't really research it earlier. There is a natural/organic food store near me that I'll check.

[Log in to Reply](#)

Rating: -2 (from 6 votes)



[Joe Espinosa](#) says:

[November 23, 2011 at 11:22 am](#)

I wanted to clarify 2 points. Dr. Greger explained that modern domesticated turkeys grow so rapidly that they are 28 pound market weight birds in the same time wild turkeys reach just 8 pounds. What this means is that even if kept in decently spaced clean conditions (not crowded, not being constantly burned by their own ammonia laden waste) without being debeaked and having toes cut off, they are still suffering immensely in their own bodies due to their massive and rapid growth. I certainly appreciate any move meat eaters make to reduce the suffering and death that they cause. But it is important that we be honest in looking at this issue. A most impactful move would be to avoid eating the animal

products that cause the most suffering and death per calorie; birds, eggs and fishes.

Rating: **+8** (from 8 votes)



alan brooks says:

[November 21, 2011 at 12:53 pm](#)

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simple dont buy them, there is no other way around this cruel practice, who said we should pay for the torture and death of these beautiful creatures at christmas in any case, your all responsible for making christmas for what it is, caring compassion , other wise what does it do for humans and (intelligence) to condone this, do on to others as you do on to you,

Rating: **+9** (from 15 votes)



Hannah S says:

[November 21, 2011 at 2:04 pm](#)

[Log in to Reply](#)

I posted this on FB and everyone freaked out saying that Wild Turkeys are more like 18-22lbs. Can someone explain why the article says, "Wild turkeys grow to be 8 pounds..."

(I agree that it is a moot point as far as the article's overall messages)

Rating: **+1** (from 1 vote)



Michael Greger M.D. says:

[November 21, 2011 at 10:41 pm](#)

[Log in to Reply](#)

While turkeys in the wild can live a decade or more, turkeys raised for meat are killed at just 3 to 4.5 months. At that age, commercial turkeys are a little over 28 pounds, whereas at that same age (4 months) wild turkeys average from [6.2 pounds \(females\) to 7.7 pounds \(males\)](#). It's thought to be that unnaturally accelerated growth rate that's responsible for the musculoskeletal damage, cardiovascular problems, and increased susceptibility to disease that can have human health consequences. Thanks for the feedback—I edited it to make it clearer.

Rating: **+3** (from 3 votes)



Deb Kimmel says:

[November 22, 2011 at 11:05 am](#)

[Log in to Reply](#)

That makes much more sense. Thanks.

Rating: **0** (from 0 votes)



Deb Kimmel says:

[November 21, 2011 at 2:19 pm](#)

[Log in to Reply](#)

Yeah, I thought it was odd that it said 8lbs, since the wild turkeys in this area seem much larger than that. My cat is a bit more than double that in weight, but quite a bit smaller in size than the wild turkeys.

Not everyone can be vegetarian. I do my best to make sure that the meat I buy comes from animals who were raised in a humane environment, hence the question about where to get a turkey that was raised in a humane environment and how to know for sure that it was.

Rating: **-3** (from 9 votes)



Lisamarie Dean says:

[November 21, 2011 at 2:28 pm](#)

[Log in to Reply](#)

Not true that "not everyone can be vegetarian"(this is an excuse)—they CAN. It's more like "not everyone WILL go veg", which is unfortunately true. It doesn't matter how he/she(the turkey) was raised anyway in the end; they still go to the same place and are murdered in the same brutal, merciless way. Meat is NOT NECESSARY, so we ought not support and participate in exploiting and abusing animals!

Rating: **+2** (from 14 votes)



Deb Kimmel says:

[November 21, 2011 at 2:41 pm](#)

[Log in to Reply](#)

They don't all go to the same place. There are family farms and small butcher shops that do things much differently than factory farms and slaughter houses. It's not right or fair to lump them together.

I respect the rights of people to be a vegetarian or vegan if they want to, but they also need to respect the rights of others who do eat meat. Just because I eat meat, doesn't mean that I don't care about animals. There are many farmers in my area who care about their animals and treat them well. Not every animal is brutalized.

Rating: **+2** (from 18 votes)



[Kelley McGill](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 8:55 pm](#)

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Regardless of how or where animals (just like your cat) are raised or killed, they are still being killed. Think of it this way, the only reasons (yes, the only one because All nutritional needs can be met through a veg diet) people eat meat are convenience and taste. Thus, animals (10 billion annually in the US alone) are being killed just because they taste nice. That is inhumane and morally wrong. If someone killed your cat or someone you love because they tasted good, wouldn't that be brutal? I would say so.

You cannot slaughter a living being unnecessarily without it being brutal. The act of killing itself is brutal. So yes, EVERY animal killed for meat is brutalized, and that is the truth.

Consequentially, how can I or other like-minded individuals respect the dietary choices of others who partake in this brutality? I cannot, because that would be paramount to "respecting" one's choice to rape, murder, or enslave (any living being, humans included).

Finally, yes, everyone CAN be vegetarian. It is physically possible for every person on this planet. Indeed, many people I know who have gone veg say it was no where near as difficult as they expected and they adjust quickly.

Rating: **+12** (from 18 votes)



[Toxins](#) says:

[November 22, 2011 at 5:13 pm](#)

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I agree with Lisamarie, eating plant based is achievable, and easy for everyone. Although I am for animal welfare, people are swayed more by health reasons over another animal's welfare. Deb, I encourage you to view videos on this website that show how animal products do not even compare to plants in regards to health. Animal products are causal for basically, all of the degenerative diseases we have going on today.

<http://nutritionfacts.org/videos/meat-mortality/>

<http://nutritionfacts.org/videos/antioxidant-power-of-plant-foods-versus-animal-foods/>

Animal foods are in no way health promoting. If they were to be eaten it should be on the rarest of occasions and it should be wild game. Again Deb, i encourage you to see more of the videos by Dr. Greger; the most fascinating ones to me were the ones about aging.

<http://nutritionfacts.org/videos/repairing-dna-damage/>

<http://nutritionfacts.org/videos/research-into-reversing-aging/>

<http://nutritionfacts.org/videos/mitochondrial-theory-of-aging/>

Good luck on your search for health!

Rating: **+2** (from 2 votes)



[Kim Ekengren](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 4:26 pm](#)

[Log in to Reply](#)

Ohh... poor turkeys! :-{

Rating: **+3** (from 3 votes)



[danbrunell](#) says:

[November 21, 2011 at 5:39 pm](#)

[Log in to Reply](#)

Vegan holiday roast for me, thanks

Rating: **+4** (from 4 votes)

Pingback: [Get Dem Apples » Monday Link Roundup » Get Dem Apples](#)

Pingback: [No picture today « kindbacteria](#)



Joe Espinosa says:

[Log in to Reply](#)

[November 23, 2011 at 11:25 am](#)

Causing others to suffer and die for our pleasure seems like a very selfish thing to do. We can each choose to not cause that suffering and death. Please pass the potatoes ;-)

Rating: **+1** (from 1 vote)

Pingback: [It's Not Thanksgiving Without PETA | Animal Free Lifestyle](#)

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