

Avian influenza on people's minds

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Researchers at the Food Policy Institute at the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station have conducted a nationwide survey of public knowledge, attitudes, intentions and behaviors related to the threat of highly pathogenic avian influenza. The researchers conducted a total of 1200 telephone interviews on the topic between May 3 and June 5, 2006.

The results suggest that avian influenza is on the national agenda. Most Americans have heard about it and have talked about it, but don't know much about it. Most are aware of the presence of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in people, birds, and poultry globally, but many are unaware that there have been no cases in humans or animals in the United States.

Despite this, Americans see their current risk of infection with avian influenza as low and are not particularly worried about it. They see the current supply of chicken products as relatively safe, and they continue to eat it. However, most see the risks of infection from avian influenza as much greater for other people than for themselves.

“This tendency to believe that others are at greater risk may be a problem in getting messages across, in influencing perceived susceptibility, and in persuading people to adopt appropriate behaviors,” says Sarah C. Condry, the lead author of the study.

The study focused on what American consumers would likely do if highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza were found in poultry in the

United States. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), in such a scenario, “The chance of infected poultry or eggs entering the food chain would be extremely low because of the rapid onset of symptoms in poultry as well as the safeguards in place, which include testing of flocks and Federal inspection programs.” Moreover, the USDA states, “Cooking poultry, eggs, and other poultry products to the proper temperature and preventing cross-contamination between raw and cooked food is the key to safety.”

However, according to William K. Hallman, director of the Food Policy Institute, “The results of the study suggest that much of the American public does not yet have the information they need to make informed choices about purchasing, preparing, and consuming poultry products, should avian influenza emerge in the United States.”

Hallman points out that U.S. farming methods for raising poultry drastically reduce the risk of an outbreak of avian influenza within our food supply. “Our poultry is typically farmed in tightly controlled environments,” he said. “The poultry industry is well aware of the dangers of avian influenza and is working closely with the USDA to take appropriate precautions to prevent an outbreak.” Yet, according to the study, only about two-thirds of Americans seem aware that the majority of chicken sold in the United States is produced domestically and that poultry products from countries with reported outbreaks of avian influenza are banned from import. In addition, while a variety of clinical symptoms makes it relatively easy to identify domestic poultry infected with avian influenza, few Americans believe that live chickens infected with avian influenza are easily distinguishable from healthy birds.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, however, a more significant fact is that “there is no evidence that people have been infected with bird flu by eating safely handled and properly cooked poultry or eggs.” Yet, less than half of Americans believe that

cooking chicken to the recommended temperature kills the avian influenza virus and only four-in-ten believe that the avian influenza virus is not transmissible to humans from eating fully cooked chicken or eggs.

“The methods for destroying avian influenza during the cooking process are the same as for destroying salmonella,” said Hallman. “If poultry contaminated with avian influenza is cooked properly, a person cannot get sick from eating the finished product.” According to the USDA, poultry and egg products should be cooked to the minimum safe internal temperature of 165 °F.

However, even if consumers can be convinced that proper cooking kills the avian influenza virus, getting them to act on this information to reduce the risk of infection may be difficult. Surveys by the Food and Drug Administration suggest that fewer than 60 percent of Americans own a meat thermometer and only 12 percent always use it when they cook chicken or chicken parts.

Instead, suggests Condry, “Consumers are likely to try to eliminate the risk entirely by avoiding consumption of poultry altogether.” In fact, the study found that if highly pathogenic avian influenza were found in chickens in the United States, nearly 40 percent of Americans say they would stop eating chicken products altogether. The study also suggests that even after receiving reassurances that it is safe to eat chicken, it would take an average of nearly five months for most Americans to begin eating it again.

The USDA reports that Americans purchase an average of 86 pounds of chicken a year; nearly 26 billion pounds a year in total. A substantial drop in domestic consumer demand would result in significant economic losses.

According to Hallman, the social and nutritional costs would also likely

be significant. “Chicken serves as a popular, low-cost source of protein for many American families.” Indeed, the USDA estimates that the per capita consumption of chicken in the United States has more than doubled since 1970. Loss of confidence in the safety of poultry would likely result in increases in the prices of alternative sources of animal protein resulting from higher consumer demands for substitutes for chicken products. “As a result, the costs of feeding the average American family would likely rise.”

Source: Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

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