NEW REPORT SHOWS SUPERBUG-INFECTED CHICKEN IS BEING SOLD ALL OVER THE U.S.

VICE News and The Bureau of Investigative Journalism’s report shows poultry giants sold tens of thousands of contaminated meat products to U.S. consumers

Full report on VICE News and will be featured on VICE News Tonight Wednesday, March 16 at 11pm ET on VICE TV and YouTube.

BROOKLYN, NY – MARCH 16, 2022 – Today, VICE News in partnership with The Bureau of Investigative Journalism published a report that finds U.S. poultry companies that supply to major grocery stores and fast food chains sold tens of thousands of products contaminated with potentially deadly bacteria between 2015 and 2020, according to government sampling records.

Over half of those products were contaminated with strains of antibiotic-resistant superbugs—a rapidly escalating issue that can be exacerbated by poor hygiene conditions.

Campylobacter is America’s biggest cause of foodborne illness, just ahead of salmonella, and both can be fatal. Campylobacter alone causes more than 100 deaths every year in America as well as 1.5 million infections.

Yet 12 major U.S. poultry companies—including Perdue, Pilgrim’s Pride, Tyson, Foster Farms, and Koch Foods—have exceeded USDA standards for acceptable levels of salmonella multiple times since 2018, when the government began reporting contamination rates at individual plants, according to the department’s records.

The USDA deems a certain level of salmonella and campylobacter within poultry acceptable, although poultry suppliers that exceed that threshold don’t need to recall their products. Tyson has supplied chicken to McDonalds. Perdue has sold to Whole Foods. Both have supplied Walmart.

“American consumers are peddled the myth that salmonella and campylobacter are an unfortunate but unavoidable nuisance in poultry; the responsibility, therefore, falls on them to protect themselves by preparing and cooking their meat carefully,” said Susannah Savage, lead reporter on the story. “The reality is that better hygiene and disease control measures on farms and in processing plants—not kitchens—could slash contamination rates, as other countries have proven.”
“The report also shows that increasingly these bugs are no longer a nuisance but a peril. As drug-resistant infections rise, so will the human costs of cheap chicken. Yet this broken system continues to place the burden on American consumers, not the companies responsible; these businesses legally and knowingly sell contaminated meat without consequence,” Savage continued.

Separate government records also show that between January 2015 and August 2019, the same 12 companies broke food safety rules on at least 145,000 occasions—or on average more than 80 times a day.

Poultry plant workers also claimed they have sometimes been asked to process rotten-smelling meat, have witnessed chicken tossed into grinders with dead insects, and found government safety inspectors apparently asleep on the job.

“Since [the meat] comes to us really dirty, when we open the box, it's like, 'Let's see what's inside!” alleged one worker at a Springdale Tyson plant. “Sometimes it has flies, it has crickets, cockroaches in there already frozen.” He claimed that when he pointed this out to the supervisors, they seemed to show little interest—and so the insects ended up getting tossed into the grinder with the meat.

The rise of drug-resistant “superbugs” is having increasingly serious human consequences. In order to treat these illnesses, doctors are turning more frequently to last-resort drugs, which often have more side-effects. And if these fail, there is no choice but to let the disease take its course. In America, antibiotic-resistant superbugs kill more than 35,000 people each year and make another 2.8 million sick.

Our teams spoke to Joanne Canda-Alvarez, whose son Jayven was paralyzed at age 9 by the sudden onset of a rare autoimmune disease that doctors linked to campylobacter. He's now 12 and still struggles to control his hands and his right foot, a result of lasting nerve damage.

The full report can be found here and will be featured on Wednesday’s edition of VICE News Tonight on Vice TV at 11pm ET.

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ABOUT THE BUREAU OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM
The Bureau of Investigative Journalism is an independent not-for-profit news organization based in London. Founded in 2010 by David and Elaine Potter, the Bureau tackles big subjects through deep reporting, telling the stories that matter.

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