



## Editorial: The Chicken Myth



Americans eat a lot of chicken. Driven by the hope that chicken is somehow less fattening than beef or pork, Americans now eat more than 1 million chickens *per hour*.

It hasn't helped. As a group, Americans are fatter than ever. In all likelihood, the chicken craze has made us *less* healthy, not the reverse.

**Neal D. Barnard, M.D.**

"Cooked too little, chicken harbors salmonella and campylobacter. Cooked too much, it harbors carcinogenic *heterocyclic amines*."

Here are seven reasons to give chicken a wide berth:

**Fat.** Even at its leanest—white meat, no skin, no added fat—chicken gets about 23 percent of its calories from fat. That's not much lower than lean beef, at 28 percent, and much higher than beans, rice, or typical fruits and vegetables (less than 10 percent). Like beef, a substantial amount of that fat is *saturated* fat—the kind linked to heart disease, diabetes, and breast cancer.

**Cholesterol.** Cholesterol is not the same as fat. Cholesterol is not visible, and most of it is in the *lean* portion, lodged in the cell membranes. USDA figures show that a typical cut of beef has about 86 milligrams of cholesterol in a 3.5-ounce portion. The same serving size of skinless chicken (white meat) has 85 milligrams. In contrast, foods derived from plants have no cholesterol at all.

**Bacteria.** That intestinal “bug” that went around the office last year might have been caused by salmonella or campylobacter—bacteria found on approximately one-third of chicken products at retail stores. They were in the chicken’s feces during life and splattered onto the skin and muscle tissue during slaughter and evisceration. Cooking kills them. But it does not kill the germs that landed on your kitchen counter, cutting board, or hands as you unwrapped the bird.

**Carcinogens.** You definitely don’t want to eat raw chicken. But neither do you want to eat heavily cooked chicken. The longer and hotter the cooking process, the more cancer-causing chemicals form. These heterocyclic amines are not chemical additives; they form from the chicken flesh itself under typical grilling conditions. They are under investigation for possible roles in colon cancer, breast cancer, and other forms of the disease.

**Environmental factors.** Raising and killing more than 1 million chickens per hour is a massive operation. Unlike asparagus, chickens defecate, and their accumulating litter leaves farmers with a serious environmental problem. One common solution: Feed it to cattle. To the surprise of consumers, chicken litter is routinely added to cattle feed. If mixed to no more than about 15 percent of their feed, cattle will readily consume it.

**Disease reservoir.** Migratory birds naturally harbor influenza viruses. But these viruses would be no more likely than wolf viruses or lizard viruses to enter human populations were it not for flocks of domesticated birds that serve as viral breeding grounds. If there were no poultry industry, there would be no epidemics of bird flu.

**Cruelty.** Anyone who has spent even a few minutes in a chicken shed is shocked by the crowding and stress birds experience during their six weeks of life. Perhaps the worst comes when workers jam the birds into transport containers that carry them to the slaughterhouse, often breaking legs or wings. At the processing plant, the priority is on speed, not on kindness.

Of all the reasons to leave chicken off our plates, perhaps the most compelling is **our children**. They are at a higher risk than ever for obesity, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other illnesses. KFC and the profusion of frozen chicken “convenience” products take them in the wrong direction. Helping children set aside the chicken myth is an important step toward good nutrition.



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