

Raising Chickens Safely

Whether raising chickens as pets or as a source of food, it's important to be aware of potential health risks. There have been several outbreaks of illness from handling baby chicks. Many outbreaks have involved young children and occurred around Easter. Some outbreaks have been associated with keeping chicks in the classroom.

Know the Risks

Chickens, turkeys, ducks, and other poultry frequently carry bacteria that can cause illness to you and your family. Baby chicks may be especially prone to shedding these germs and causing human illness. Shipment and adapting to new locations causes stress on birds, which can make them more likely to shed bacteria in their droppings. While anyone can become ill from exposure to these germs, the risk of infection is especially high for children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems (e.g. people receiving chemotherapy or who are HIV-infected).

One of the most important bacteria to be aware of is *Salmonella* because birds infected with *Salmonella* usually do not appear to be sick. *Salmonella* lives in the intestine of infected chickens and can be shed in large numbers in the droppings. Once shed, bacteria can spread across the chicken's body as the bird cleans itself and throughout the environment as the chicken walks around. Therefore, it is especially important to carefully wash hands with soap and water after handling birds or anything that has come in contact with them.

If you eat after handling chickens or touch your hand to your mouth while working with the birds, you may become ill. Typical symptoms of *Salmonella* infection are nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. These symptoms generally appear within one to three days of exposure and may last for up to a week. Individuals with weaker immune systems commonly have more severe infections.

Reduce the Risk

If you plan to raise chickens, follow these steps to keep yourself and your family safe from disease:

Keep Young Children and People with Weak Immune Systems Away

- Keep chicks and chickens away from people with weaker immune systems. This includes the elderly, pregnant women, diabetics, patients receiving chemotherapy, and people who are infected with HIV.
- Supervise small children when they interact with chicks or chickens. Children less than five years of age tend to put their hands and other potentially contaminated objects into their mouths.
- Do not allow chickens to roam freely around the house.

Wash Hands Frequently

- Always wash your hands with soap and water after touching chickens or anything in their environment, and supervise hand washing for small children. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Bacteria on hands can be easily transferred to objects and other people.

Keep Chicks Away from Food Areas and Keep Areas Clean

- Do not eat or drink while near chickens, and keep chickens away from food preparation areas.
- Frequently clean the area where chickens are kept. Do not wash items from chicken coops in the kitchen sink.
- Wash contaminated items with hot soapy water or with a mild bleach solution.

Contact your health care provider if you have abdominal pain, fever, and/or diarrhea after handling chicks or chickens.

