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Poison bug 'more likely to be found in organic chickens'

By SEAN POULTER - [More by this author](#) » Last updated at 22:42pm on 10th June 2007

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Organic chickens sold by leading supermarkets have been labelled a health threat by a damning investigation.

Researchers claim they are more likely to carry the deadly food poisoning bug campylobacter than factory farmed chicken.

As many as nine in ten of the organic chickens showed up positive for the bug.

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Footage from an organic chicken farm filmed for Tonight With Trevor McDonald

And up to one in four carries a superbug version of campylobacter, which is particularly harmful to humans.

The claims, which follow scientific surveys of organic chicken sold by all the leading supermarkets, will seriously undermine the perception that these farming methods are healthy and nutritious.

Consumers may now question the value of paying £6 to £7 for an organic chicken rather than a factory bird at less than half the price.

Researchers looked at the bugs carried on the carcasses of 46 supermarket organic chickens and found that 89 per cent had campylobacter.

That is higher than the figure of 70 per cent that Government figures show is found in factory farmed chickens, which spend their lives in vast cramped sheds.

More worrying was a finding that 26 per cent of these organic chickens contained a superbug form of campylobacter.

The concern about these bugs is that they have a resistance to antibiotics.

Consequently, doctors find it hard to treat humans who become infected because antibiotic medicines do not work.

Campylobacter is the most common cause of food poisoning in Britain, ahead of bugs such as salmonella and listeria.

The research was commissioned by ITV1's Tonight With Trevor McDonald.

The programme presented the findings to Professor Martin Blaser, head of medicine at New York Medical School.

He said: "It's important to educate the public that organic chicken is not free of bacteria and it's not free of campylobacter and it has to be prepared in exactly the same safe ways that non-organic chicken is."

He described the symptoms, saying: "It can be a mild illness with a small amount of diarrhoea or very severe diarrhoea with someone going to the bathroom ten or 20 times a day for a number of days.

"Occasionally people die from the dehydration.

"There are complications of campylobacter infection, one of the most severe is the Guillain-Barre syndrome which is a neurological disease leading to paralysis.

"Guillain-Barre syndrome can be fatal, or it can lead to permanent neurologic damage."

Superbug versions of campylobacter have emerged in response to the feeding of antibiotics to chickens to kill illness in the flocks.

The only way these bugs have been able to survive is to adapt and become immune to these drugs.

Professor Blaser said: "There is increasing evidence that people who have these antibiotic resistant bacteria have more severe illnesses."

It is surprising that such bugs should be found in organic birds, because the use of antibiotic drugs during rearing should be restricted.

The TV programme also suggests that some organic farmers are apparently failing to live up to promises to offer higher welfare standards.

The programme includes undercover footage from an organic chicken farm, the Traditional Norfolk Poultry (TNP) farm at Stow Bedon in Norfolk.

Footage shows the carcasses of young chicks on the ground, which have apparently been eaten and picked at by rats.

When challenged over the images, TNP defended the conditions, denied that there was a rat problem and insisted that its birds are monitored by vets.

The Soil Association, the country's main organic certification body, questioned whether the campylobacter found in the research were strains that are harmful to humans.

The organisation also believes that the superbug level of 26 per cent in organic birds is likely to be less than factory farmed birds.

And it suggested that the size of the survey sample, at 46, was not reliable to give a true picture.

The Food Standards Agency says the risk of campylobacter is completely removed if people wash their hands when handling chicken and cook it thoroughly.

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7 people have commented on this story so far. Tell us what you think below.

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I have a relative who was very seriously ill indeed with Guillain Barre Syndrome due to campylobacter poisoning from chicken. He has never fully recovered, and was off work for 3 years. This is not something to be taken lightly. And yes, he knows how to cook chicken. In fact, we were all at the same barbecue, yet none of us was ill from the same bug...

- Jaykay, London

What is all the fuss about? Read the last line; 'The Food Standards Agency says the risk of campylobacter is completely removed if people wash their hands when handling chicken and cook it thoroughly.'

Basically if you handle and cook the chicken properly and in a hygienic manner, then you kill the bug. So unless you're into eating raw chicken (which would make you ill anyway, regardless of whether it contains any 'superbugs') then I can't really see the problem. People should be educated in the proper way to prepare and handle food, instead of getting all hyped up when another strain of bacteria is found in the raw product.

- Grace, Hampshire, England

I used to believe organic was better, that's what everyone kept telling me. I participated in an organic box scheme for two years believing it to be better and more cost effective. However, since it ended in March and I reverted back to the supermarket I have found my food bills have reduced by more than half, and the taste is no different. I also don't have to nip to the shops mid-way through the week to replace items which have begun to rot. I don't expect things to last forever, but it would have been nice for them to have lasted the week.

- Sarah, Chester

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On a dramatic night, there was mixed news for the boys, Matt and Gethin



[Before they were famous \(and shocking\): Amy and Billie together at fame academy](#)

One is now a tattooed drug addict, the other stars in the Secret Diary of a Call Girl, but in this schoolgirl snap they are simply classmates without a care in the world



[Maureen Lipman ditches her 'dirty, rotten rat' lover over his 'inappropriate behaviour'](#)

Maureen Lipman has split from the wealthy businessman she found happiness with after the death of her husband of 30 years



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There is speculation she had her implants taken out for the tour so she can fit into the costumes and dance easily



[I've never been happier, says runaway schoolgirl as she starts married life with Egyptian 12 years her senior](#)

He doesn't speak English and she knows only a few basic Arabic words. But, after her marriage to a 30-year-old Egyptian and a warm welcome from the in-laws with whom she'll be living, Amy Robson says she's found happiness



[Found: The Australian wife of gay I'm a Celebrity winner Christopher Biggins](#)

This is Beatrice Aston, the Australian actress Christopher Biggins married, despite knowing he was gay

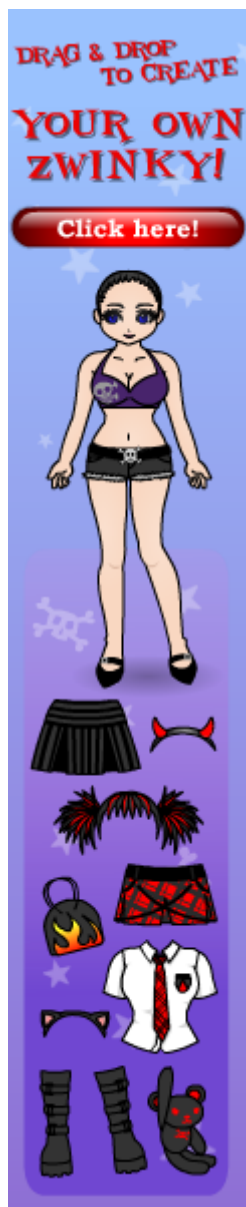
['The truth is I'm not rich enough for her': Celebrity chef John Burton Race hits back at his wife](#)

Last week celebrity chef John Burton Race's wife accused him of being a drunk who fired a shotgun in his own home... now he gives his side of the story

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David Beckham led a host of celebrities cheering for British boxer Ricky Hatton in Las Vegas today.



[Amy Winehouse's mother sends open letter to save tormented star](#)

Distraught Janis Winehouse has made an impassioned plea aimed at saving Amy from self-destruction



[Toyboy Tom is the Wright age for Sadie](#)

Sadie Frost,42, just can't seem to help cradle-snatching. She is now dating Tom Wright, 23, son of Radio 2's Steve Wright



[Post office in Joan Collins ad is a fake ...](#)

It may look new but this glossy post TV office is a fake - just around the corner from a real one which was axed weeks ago



[Will Smith wants to be President of the United States](#)

The Hollywood star - who made his name in Men In Black - now wants to be the man in the Whitehouse



[Cate Blanchett blooms as she expects baby number three](#)

She is starring as Elizabeth I, but there are obvious signs her next role will be that of an expectant mother



[Stripper must pay Flatley millions over rape claims](#)

Michael Flatley has been awarded more than £6million damages from a stripper who claimed he raped her



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Jonathan Rhys Meyers - whose mother died last month - has split from his girlfriend



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