

NATION

Backyard chicken trend linked to spike in salmonella cases

By DAVID PITT Associated Press | OCTOBER 21, 2017 — 3:04PM

DES MOINES – Luke Gabriele was a healthy 14-year-old football player in Pennsylvania when he began to feel soreness in his chest that grew increasingly painful. After his breathing became difficult, doctors detected a mass that appeared to be a tumor.

For a week, Dan and DeAnna Gabriele thought their son was dying until tests identified the cause: not cancer, but chickens — the ones he cared for at home.

They had apparently infected him with salmonella that produced a severe abscess.

The trend of raising backyard chickens in U.S. cities and suburbs is bringing with it a soaring number of illnesses from poultry-related diseases, and at least one death.

Since January, more than 1,100 people have contracted salmonella poisoning from chickens and ducks in 48 states, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Almost 250 were hospitalized and one person died. The toll was four times higher than in 2015.

The CDC estimates that the actual number of cases from contact with chickens and ducks is likely much higher.

“For one salmonella case we know of in an outbreak, there are up to 30 others that we don’t know about,” CDC veterinarian Megin Nichols said.

A “large contributing factor” to the surge, Nichols said, comes from natural food fanciers who have taken up the backyard chicken hobby but don’t understand potential dangers. Some treat their birds like pets, kissing or snuggling them and letting them walk around the house.

Poultry can carry salmonella bacteria in their intestines that can be shed in their feces. The bacteria can attach to feathers and dust and brush off on shoes or clothing.

Illnesses can be prevented with proper handling. The CDC recommends that people raising chickens wash their hands thoroughly after handling the birds, eggs or nesting materials, and leave any shoes worn in a chicken coop outside.

Dr. Stacene Maroushek, a pediatric infectious disease specialist in Minneapolis, sees both sides of the trend. She manages her own flock of about 50 birds.

“I think it’s really important to know where your food comes from, but I do think they need to be educated on how to do it safely,” Maroushek said. “There are things growing up as a farm kid you know instinctively but city people don’t know.”

In her clinic, she’s seen young children suffering from salmonella poisoning. The bacteria often cause flu-like symptoms, including diarrhea, and can produce more serious infections in people with weak immune systems.

“It gets into their blood and it can get into organs,” she said. “It can be much more significant in people with underlying health problems.”



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Handle with care: Tanya Keith and her daughter
lolana fed chickens in their yard in Des Moines.
“We don’t transfer chicken germs to our face,”...