



PRESS RELEASE April 5, 2006
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Press contact
Ben Lilliston
(612) 870-3416 or blilliston@iatp.org

Arsenic Widespread in Chicken, Testing Finds

Avoidable arsenic commonly added to chicken feed; Arsenic-free chicken available

Minneapolis – Brand name chicken products sold in American supermarkets and fast food restaurants are widely contaminated with arsenic, according to independent test results released today by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

Testing of 155 samples from uncooked supermarket chicken products found 55 percent carried detectable arsenic. Arsenic was more than twice as prevalent in conventional brands of supermarket chicken as in certified organic and other “premium” brands. All 90 fast food chicken products tested by IATP also contained detectable arsenic. The full report can be read at: www.iatp.org.

Arsenic in chicken meat appears closely linked to the decades-old practice of intentionally and routinely putting arsenic into chicken feed. At least 70 percent of U.S. broiler chickens have been fed arsenic, according to estimates.

“Adding arsenic to chicken feed is a needless and ultimately avoidable practice that only exposes more people to more of this ancient poison,” said Dr. David Wallinga, a physician, author of *Playing Chicken: Avoiding Arsenic in Your Meat*, and director of IATP’s Food and Health program.

“There is good news. Consumers can limit or eliminate their arsenic intake in chicken by making smart choices about which chicken to buy,” said Wallinga. “Our testing found plenty of supermarket chicken without any detectable arsenic. Birds sold under organic labels can’t legally be given arsenic. For other chicken, your best bet is to directly ask for some assurance from the producer, supermarket or restaurant that’s selling it.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture fails to test for arsenic in the chicken breasts or thighs that Americans mostly eat, and does not make public results of its testing of individual brands.

Brand name chicken products tested by IATP included Foster Farms, Trader Joe’s, Gold’n Plump, Perdue, Smart Chicken, and Tyson Foods. Fast food chains that had chicken products tested included McDonald’s, Wendy’s, Arby’s, Subway, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Church’s and Popeyes. Chicken products were purchased from supermarkets and fast food outlets in Minnesota and California and were analyzed for arsenic by a private, independent commercial laboratory.

Some specific findings from the report:

- Arsenic levels vary significantly. The most contaminated brands of uncooked chicken breasts and thighs on average had arsenic levels around ten-fold higher than did the brands found to be least contaminated with arsenic;

- Plenty of the raw chicken tested had no or nearly no detectable arsenic, including that from some organic companies and most chicken tested from the world's largest chicken producer, Tyson Foods;
- Five packages of Gold'n Plump livers contained an average of nearly 222 ppb arsenic, the highest of all the chicken samples;
- Prepared chicken thighs from Church's on average had 20 times the arsenic levels of thighs from KFC. The chicken in sandwiches from Jack In The Box on average had more than five times the arsenic than in Subway sandwiches.
- An estimated 1.7 to 2.2 million pounds of roxarsone, a single arsenic feed additive, are given each year to chickens. Much of this ends up in chicken litter and the broader environment.

Arsenic causes cancer and contributes to other diseases including heart disease, diabetes and declines in intellectual function. While none of the chicken products tested had arsenic levels above federal standards, much has changed since those standards were set. For one thing, Americans eat at least two and a half times more chicken than they did 40 years ago. Additionally, the latest science reports that some forms of arsenic are more toxic than previously thought, and cumulative human exposures to arsenic, including in chicken meat, are likely higher than previously thought.

“Smarter poultry companies, from the world's largest to some of the smallest, no longer use routine arsenic,” says Dr. Wallinga. “Europe has banned the practice. It's long past the time to take arsenic out of U.S. poultry feed.”

The report made several recommendations:

- Consumers should seek out chicken raised without arsenic in its feed, including that sold as USDA-certified organic chicken, under which the practice is prohibited;
- Poultry companies should voluntarily avoid the use of arsenic and inform consumers of such;
- Restaurants, hospitals and schools should ask their poultry suppliers to stop using arsenic in feed;
- Federal and state regulators should withdraw approval for meat and poultry producers to add arsenic to our food chain and environment.

The full report can be found at: www.iatp.org

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works globally to promote resilient family farms, communities and ecosystems through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy.

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