



Talking Turkey:

WHICH TURKEY BRANDS USE ANTIBIOTICS RESPONSIBLY?

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U.S. PIRG | Standing Up To
Powerful Interests

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Image: Jumpstory



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Executive summary

In light of the ongoing pandemic, the holiday season is going to look a little different this year, but some staples will remain. Whether it's during socially distant dinners or virtual gatherings, millions of Americans will still eat turkey this holiday season. They can help protect public health by purchasing a turkey raised without the overuse of antibiotics.

Antibiotics are becoming less effective, putting peoples' lives and the future of modern medicine at risk. Overusing antibiotics to produce meat is one of the foremost contributors to antibiotic resistance. (1) And much of the conventional turkey industry routinely doses birds with medically important antibiotics to compensate for industrial farming conditions. (2) We reviewed the antibiotic use policies of 15 popular consumer-facing brands that sell whole turkeys so Americans can make an informed decision when they purchase their holiday turkey this year. Take a look at our buying guide to see which birds made the cut.

Antibiotic resistance

Antibiotic resistance is an emerging global health crisis. Every year drug resistant infections claim the lives of at least 35,000 Americans, and sicken millions more. (3) Without swift action to reduce antibiotic use, those numbers are expected to skyrocket. (4)

Nearly two thirds of the medically important antibiotics sold in the United States go to food animals. (5) Despite the importance of these drugs to human health,



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antibiotics are often administered as a preventative measure to otherwise healthy animals to compensate for unsanitary, stressful, and overcrowded conditions. (6) Public health experts warn that overusing antibiotics in this way proliferates drug resistant bacteria. (7)

The routine use of antibiotics in food animal production provides the perfect breeding ground for antibiotic resistant bacteria, which can spread from the farm and make people sick. (8) As a result, seemingly common place infections can become life threatening.

While the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) prohibits the sale of antibiotics for growth promotion, the agency continues to allow the routine use of these drugs for disease prevention. (9) Public health experts agree that the FDA policy does not go far enough to limit antibiotic overuse and slow drug-resistance. (10) Medically important antibiotics should only be used to treat sick animals diagnosed by a licensed veterinarian, or in limited circumstances to control a verified disease outbreak.

The problem with turkey

Turkey production accounts for the highest per pound antibiotic use in the meat industry. In 2017 turkey production used nearly 18 times more medically important antibiotics than chicken per pound of meat produced. (11, 12) It seems that turkey producers have flown under the radar when it comes to overusing antibiotics.

The best way to drive much needed change in the turkey industry is to vote with your wallet. Americans consume around 46 million turkeys for Thanksgiving, which is a fifth of all annual turkey sales. (13) To help Americans shop sustainably, we reviewed the websites of 15 popular turkey brands to determine which brands have transparent policies on responsible antibiotic use.

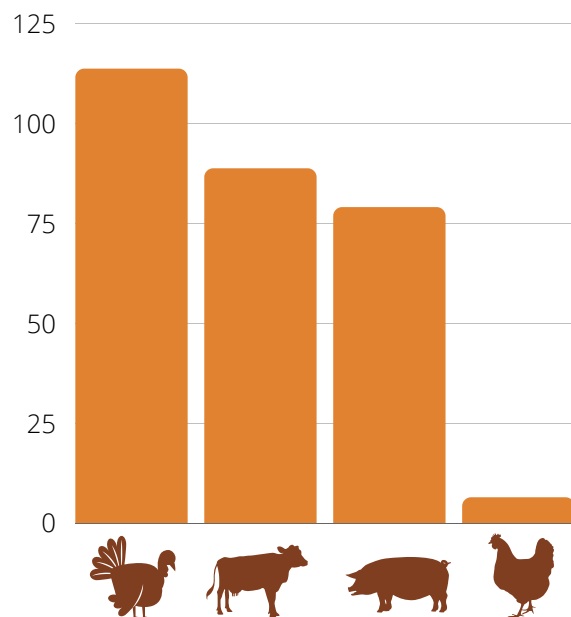


Figure 1: mg of medically important antibiotics used per pound of meat produced

In 2017 turkey production used nearly 18 times more medically important antibiotics than chicken per pound of meat produced.

Our methodology

During our review we compiled the antibiotic use policies available on the websites of 15 popular turkey brands. We then reached out to each brand to verify that the antibiotic use policies we found were the most up to date versions available.

We received confirmations from the following brands: Organic Valley, Butterball, Jennie-O, Signature Select and Signature Farms, and Fresh Murray's Natural Turkey Label.

For those brands that did not respond to our confirmation email, we used the publicly available information on their website to complete the report.

Talking Turkey

Which turkey brands use antibiotics responsibly?

Does not overuse antibiotics



WILD. NATURAL. SUSTAINABLE.



Overuses antibiotics



A Thanksgiving buying guide brought to you by

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How to use our buying guide

The brands reviewed were split into two categories corresponding with their commitment to antibiotic stewardship.

Those in the green category have publicly available information on their websites saying that they prohibit the use of all antibiotics or at least the routine use of medically important antibiotics in their turkey supply chains. Routine use refers to antibiotic use in otherwise healthy animals to prevent disease.

Those in the red category represent companies that either don't have publicly available information about their antibiotic use or the information suggests they continue to routinely use antibiotics for disease prevention purposes. While these brands may comply with the bare minimum requirements as set out by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), according to their websites they have not committed publicly to stopping the overuse of antibiotics across their entire supply chain of whole turkeys.

There were two companies considered honorable mentions; Foster Farms and Northern Pride Inc. These brands offer "No Antibiotics Ever" lines or similar USDA Organic lines, but according to publicly available information the rest of their product lines do not include policies prohibiting the routine use of medically important antibiotics.

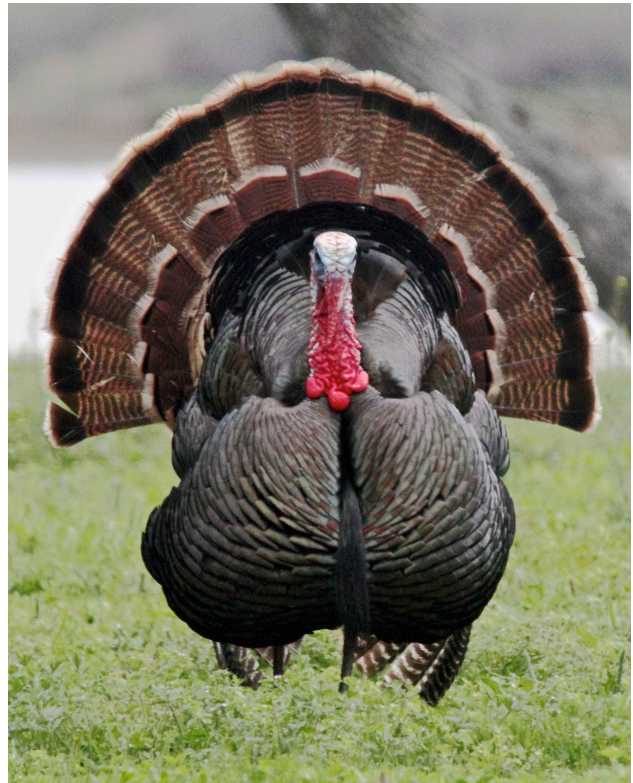


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Conclusion

Millions of Americans are about to purchase their Thanksgiving turkeys. We are thankful for all the brands that have made a commitment to preserving life saving antibiotics. It is crucial that companies continue to make these commitments.

By purchasing their holiday turkeys raised without overusing antibiotics consumers can make public health a priority and encourage more companies to adopt better antibiotic use policies.

Have a happy Thanksgiving!

Labeling Resource

Don't see your family's favorite bird on our list? Here's a short guide on which labels indicate a turkey was raised without overusing antibiotics.

1. Do a quick google search! Most companies that have committed to responsible antibiotic use policies are clear and public about it. They use verified labels and include supply chain standards on their websites. It may take a little research but finding your own trusted brands is the key to responsible consumerism.



2. Third Party Verified Labels. The labels shown above all uphold responsible use standards for medically important antibiotics. They require increased levels of transparent reporting relative to standard farming practices and provide peace of mind for consumers looking for meat raised without antibiotics. Also look for the exact phrases: No antibiotics administered, Raised without antibiotics, and No antibiotics ever. These phrases have a strict definitions and require similar levels of transparency as third party verified labels. (14)



3. USDA Organic is always a safe bet. The USDA organic label is third party verified by the USDA. It requires a higher standards across the board including that the animals were raised with improved living conditions, 100% organic feed, and no antibiotic use. (15) You learn more about USDA Organic standards on their website.

4. Avoid unverified labels or claims. Phrases like "Natural," "100% Antibiotic Free," and "Sustainably raised" are often unverified or vague claims. They have no strict definition or required third party oversight. Often these phrases can be misleading about the true nature of the product. When in doubt stick to the phrases and labels above.

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Appendix A: Turkey brands' publicly available antibiotic use policy as found on their websites

Brand	Public policy on website	Antibiotic use policy
Organic Prairie	Yes	No Antibiotics Ever ¹⁶
Nature's Rancher	Yes	No Antibiotics Ever ¹⁷
Norbest	Yes	No routine use of medically important antibiotics ¹⁸
Perdue	Yes	No Antibiotics Ever ¹⁹
Fossil Farms	Yes	No Antibiotics Ever ²⁰
Plainville Farms	Yes	Never administered antibiotics ²¹
Koch's Turkey Farm	Yes	Raise our turkeys without antibiotics ²²
Butterball	Yes	Certified Responsible Antibiotic Use ²³
Fresh Murray's Natural Turkey	Yes	Raised without antibiotics ²⁴
Foster Farms	Yes	Offer USDA organic line ²⁵
Northern Pride Inc.	Yes	Offer No Antibiotics Ever line ²⁶
Shady Brook Farms	Yes	Prohibits growth promoters Allows preventive use ²⁷
Honeysuckle White	Yes	Prohibits growth promoters Allows preventive use ²⁸
Jennie-O	No	Prohibits growth promoters ²⁹
Signature Select or Signature Farms	Yes	Prohibits growth promoters "Encourages" stewardship ³⁰