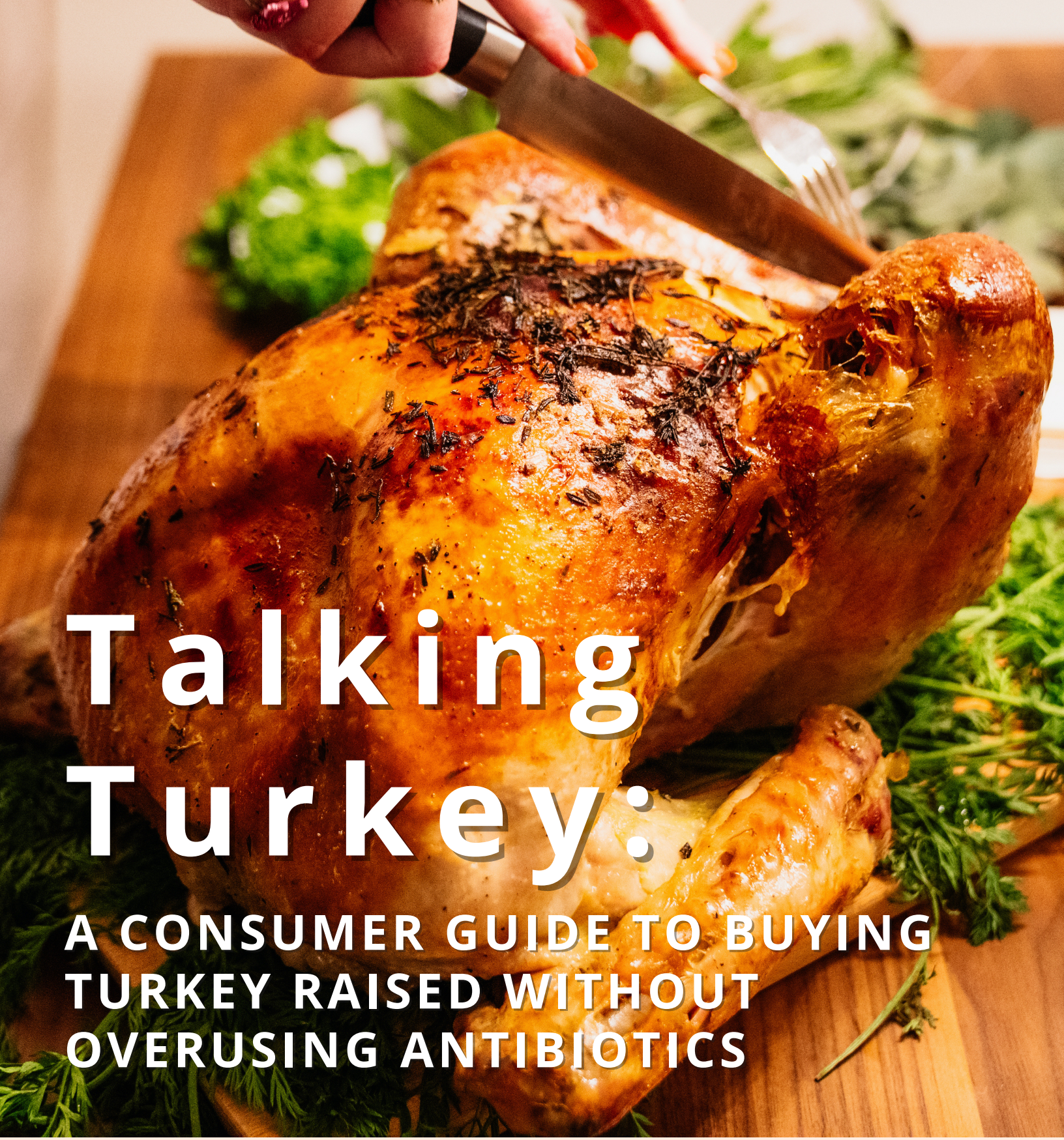

Talking Turkey:

A CONSUMER GUIDE TO BUYING TURKEY RAISED WITHOUT OVERUSING ANTIBIOTICS

NOVEMBER 2020

U.S. PIRG | Standing Up To Powerful Interests

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Image: Jumpstory

Acknowledgments

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders or those who provided review.

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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) 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 on the websites 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 fosters 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 commonplace 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 producers use more medically important antibiotics per pound of meat produced than any other sector of 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.

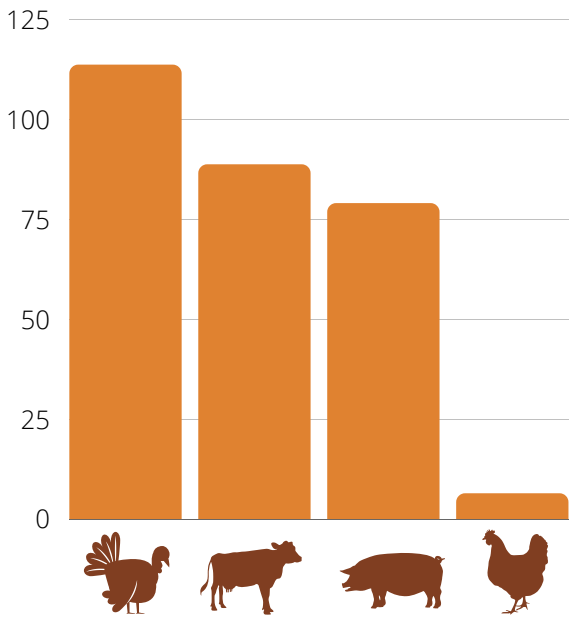


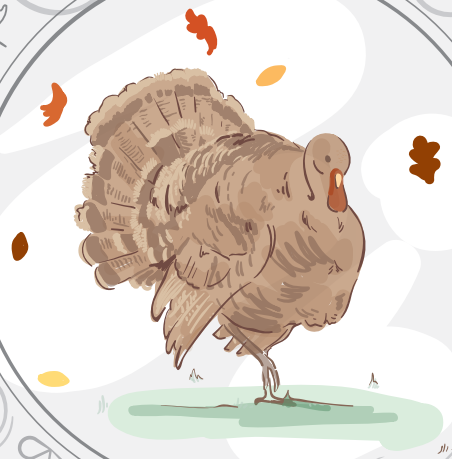
Figure 1: mg of medically important antibiotics used per pound of meat produced

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 information available on the websites of 15 popular turkey brands. We notified these companies about what we found and asked them to verify that the information on their websites is accurate and up to date.

Our buying guide is based on public information about each brand's antibiotic use that a consumer could easily access on that brand's website. Using that information, we split the companies into three categories -- green, yellow, and red -- which we describe in the "How to use our buying guide section." You can view more detailed information about these companies' antibiotics use in Appendix A.



Talking Turkey

Which brands have the best policies?

PERDUE®

Koch's TURKEY
A Family Farm

plainville FARMS

FAMILY FARMED
MURRAY'S
NATURALLY RAISED

ORGANIC PRAIRIE®
FARMER-OWNED

SINCE 1930
RANCH RAISED TURKEYS
Norbest

NATURE'S NR RANCHER

FOSSIL FF FARMS
WILD. NATURAL. SUSTAINABLE.

BUTTERBALL®

NORTHERN PRIDE INC.
GROWER OWNED SINCE 1989

FOSTER FARMS®

Jennie-O®
BRAND

HONEYSUCKLE WHITE®

SHADY BROOK FARMS®

Signature Farms®
QUALITY GUARANTEED

A Thanksgiving buying guide brought to you by

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How to use our buying guide

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

Green category: These companies have publicly available information on their websites saying that they prohibit the use of all antibiotics or the routine use of medically important antibiotics in all of the whole turkeys that they sell. Routine use refers to antibiotic use in otherwise healthy animals to prevent disease.

Yellow category: These companies may offer lines of whole turkeys raised without antibiotics, or without the routine use of medically important antibiotics. However, check your label! That policy doesn't necessarily apply to all whole turkeys sold by the brand, based on their websites.

Red category: These companies have no or limited information about antibiotic use in whole turkeys on their websites, and what is available suggests that they continue to use medically important antibiotics routinely to prevent disease in otherwise healthy animals.

Our analysis is based on publicly available information on the companies' websites, but consumers should stay vigilant when making purchasing decisions. Check the labels of turkeys before you buy them to ensure they use antibiotics responsibly. You can use the labeling resource at the end of this report to navigate the different labels.

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Conclusion

Antibiotic resistance is a major health crisis. It's critical that turkey companies source only turkeys raised without the routine use of medically important antibiotics. Doing so will help protect public health. Companies should also provide consumers with easily accessible and clear information on their websites about their antibiotic use.

As millions of Americans set out to buy their Thanksgiving turkeys, we hope they use this guide as a resource for purchasing a bird raised without overusing antibiotics.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Labeling Resource

Don't see your family's favorite bird on our list? Here's a short guide on how to determine if 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 it is worth it!

2. Third-party verified labels. The labels shown below 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." (14)

3. USDA Organic is always a safe bet. The USDA organic label is third-party verified by the USDA. It requires a higher standard across the board, including that the animals were raised with improved living conditions, fed 100% organic food and given no antibiotic. (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.

The phrase "No growth promoting antibiotics" has also gained traction in recent years. As of 2017, this is required by law, and health professionals agree that this action alone does not go far enough to limit antibiotic overuse and slow drug resistance.

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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	Organic [16]
Nature's Rancher	Yes	"No antibiotics ever" [17]
Perdue	Yes	"No antibiotics ever" [18]
Fossil Farms	Yes	"Never ever program" Antibiotics are never used [19]
Plainville Farms	Yes	Never ever given antibiotics [20]
Koch's Turkey Farm	Yes	Raised without antibiotics [21]
Fresh Murray's Natural Turkey	Yes	Raised without antibiotics [22]
Butterball	Yes	Products carry the Certified Responsible Antibiotics Use (CRAU) label* [23]
Foster Farms	Yes	Offers USDA organic line [24]
Jennie-O	Yes	Offers product lines raised without antibiotics** [25]
Northern Pride Inc.	Yes	Offers No Antibiotics Ever and USDA Organic line [26]
Shady Brook Farms	Yes	No commitment beyond current regulations. [27]
Honeysuckle White	Yes	No commitment beyond current regulations. [28]
Signature Farms	Yes	No commitment beyond current regulations. [29]

*Butterball states on their website, "Butterball products proudly carry the Certified Responsible Antibiotics Use (CRAU) label," but the website does not specify which products the CRAU label applies to, including whether this standard applies to any or all of their whole turkeys sold. Moreover, Butterball responded to our inquiry and stated that they use medications such as antibiotics for prevention of disease.

**Jennie-O's parent company, Hormel, states on their website that they "never use medically-important antibiotics for growth promotion or other purposes." However, this information is not easily accessible on the Jennie-O website.