

EXCLUSIVE

How diseased 'Frankenchickens' sold in your supermarket are making you ill

About 90 per cent of chickens bought in UK supermarkets are Frankenchickens and this has serious implications for the Britons eating them



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Growing numbers of [chickens](#) suffering from diseases and dying prematurely in slaughterhouses are contributing towards serious illness and potential deaths in humans, *The i Paper* can reveal.

The prevalence of bigger, fast-growing chicken breeds on UK farms – dubbed “Frankenchickens” by campaigners – has led to more people developing health problems, according to animal welfare charities.

These types of birds require greater levels of [antibiotics](#), which is contributing to the growing human health problem of [antibiotic resistant infections](#), the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics said.

Antibiotic resistant bacteria are causing [increasing numbers of deaths](#) in the UK. According to the latest available figures from the UK Health Security Agency, 2,640 people died from serious antibiotic-resistant infections in 2023 – a 10 per cent rise since 2019.

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practices, were identified by charities as contributing to illnesses and early deaths suffered by chickens.

As such, they are “pumped full of antibiotics”, which is contributing to the growing human health problem of antibiotic resistance, animal welfare experts have warned.

Most common health problems found in chickens at slaughterhouses

Number of chickens identified from 2022-2024

Cellulitis	9,344,733
Ascites/Oedema	8,337,233
Abnormal Colour/Fever	6,702,873
Perihepatitis/Peritonitis	3,192,514
Dead on Arrival/Death in the Lairage	3,174,038
Pericarditis	2,698,267
Hepatitis	2,306,398
Myopathies - Oregans/Green Muscle/Wooden Breast	1,478,552
Bruising/Fractures	1,045,731
Joint Lesions (Hock Burns)	772,112

Source: Food Standards Agency data analysed by The *i* Paper

Some 18.7 million chickens were found with diseases and abnormal conditions at abattoirs in 2024, up from 18.3 million in 2022, according to official data obtained by *The i Paper* under freedom of information laws.

The figures from the Food Standards Agency, the food regulator, showed that 1.07 million chickens died during transport to abattoirs or while waiting for slaughter in 2024. This increased from 1.02 million in 2023.

The most common problem found was cellulitis, a bacterial skin infection, which was detected in at least 9.3 million chickens over the past three years, *The i Paper's* analysis of the data found.

This was followed by ascites and oedema – fluid build-up in the abdomen and legs or feet – which affected 8.3 million birds, and abnormal colour or fever, found in 6.7 million cases. Only one condition is recorded per animal, so these numbers may be even greater than reported.

Diseases detected among the animals included peritonitis, hepatitis, pericarditis and myopathies.

Diseased lives

Sean Gifford, managing director of the Humane League, an animal welfare charity, said the figures pointed to “an absolute horror show of suffering and animal welfare problems” in chicken farming.

He and other charities said many of these problems can be traced back to the use of Frankenchickens, which have been genetically selected to put on breast meat unnaturally quickly. About 90 per cent of chickens bought in UK supermarkets are Frankenchickens, according to the RSPCA.

The average chicken now grows to slaughter weight in 35 days – four times faster than about 50 years ago.

Due to their abnormal weight, these birds often struggle to get up and move, according to the RSPCA, The Humane League and Open Cages, another animal welfare charity.

They are typically given less than an A4 sheet of paper's worth of space in a shed that does not get cleaned during their lifetime. As a consequence, they end up living in their own urine and faeces, suffering from burns and infections due to the ammonia. Cramped conditions mean diseases spread quickly among the animals.



Frankenchickens struggle to stand up because their breasts grow unnaturally quickly (Photo: Open Cages)

“Their entire lives are filled with pain, suffering and stress,” Gifford said. “That lowers their immune systems and increases the likelihood that they show up at the slaughterhouse diseased, dying or dead.”

Kate Parkes, a poultry specialist at the RSPCA, said the fast growth rate of chickens was the biggest welfare problem affecting the industry. She said there has been an “ever-increasing drive” to speed up chicken growth in the name of productivity, adding: “The issue’s just going to get worse and worse.”

Connor Jackson, chief executive and co-founder of animal welfare charity Open Cages, said the figures obtained by *The i Paper* were “shocking”, adding: “The vast majority of the chickens that we farm in the UK have very poor lives.”

For Frankenchickens already dealing with health problems, the stressful journey to the slaughterhouse can be the final straw, leading to deaths and heart attacks, he said.

Bethan Apted, technical officer at the Humane Slaughter Association, said some birds are caught by one leg instead of two before being transported. “They can dislocate the hip, which can lead to hemorrhage and then death in transport,” she said.

The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has launched a consultation on catching methods which charities hope will pave the way for rules that birds must be caught by both legs.

A lack of ventilation in trucks or in the lairage where poultry are kept before slaughter can also pose problems, with birds suffering heat stress, Apted added.

Many more chickens will die on farms, often in the final week of their lives as their weight causes them to collapse, Jackson said. About 1.5 million chickens die prematurely on farms every week, according to The Humane League.

Antibiotic use on farms

Since Frankenchickens suffer from poor health, they are “pumped full of antibiotics”, which is contributing to the growing human health problem of antibiotic resistance, Gifford said.

Frankenchickens are five times more likely to be treated with antibiotics than other breeds, according to the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, a campaign group.



Chickens are typically farmed in crowded sheds (Photo: Open Cages)

“We should really only be giving antibiotics to human beings, but we’re regularly, prophylactically feeding them to farmed animals,” Gifford said.

“Healthy animals that are slow-growing breeds and are allowed enough space to do what comes naturally to them are generally healthier and require far fewer antibiotics. It is a human health crisis time bomb.”

Cóilín Nunan, scientific adviser at the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, said the prevalence of fast-growing chicken breeds “leads to higher levels of antibiotic use” on farms, which “contributes to antibiotic resistance”. Farm antibiotic use accounts for about 30 per cent of British antibiotic use, according to Compassion in World Farming.

The more antibiotics are used – whether on humans or animals – the more the bacteria will tend to evolve to become resistant to the antibiotics, Nunan said.

Antibiotic resistant bacteria in chicken carcasses can pass on to consumers when they are handling the raw meat and if they do not cook it well enough, which can lead to an antibiotic resistant infection. “This can ultimately kill you”, Nunan said.

Chickens’ manure containing this bacteria also gets spread on land and can then end up on vegetables and in drinking water, he added.

These dangerous bacteria include *E. coli*, campylobacter, salmonella, MRSA and *Clostridium difficile*.

Seventy percent of human campylobacter infections in the UK come from chickens, and are more likely to come from poultry subject to more stress, according to the Food Standards Agency and

the RSPCA.

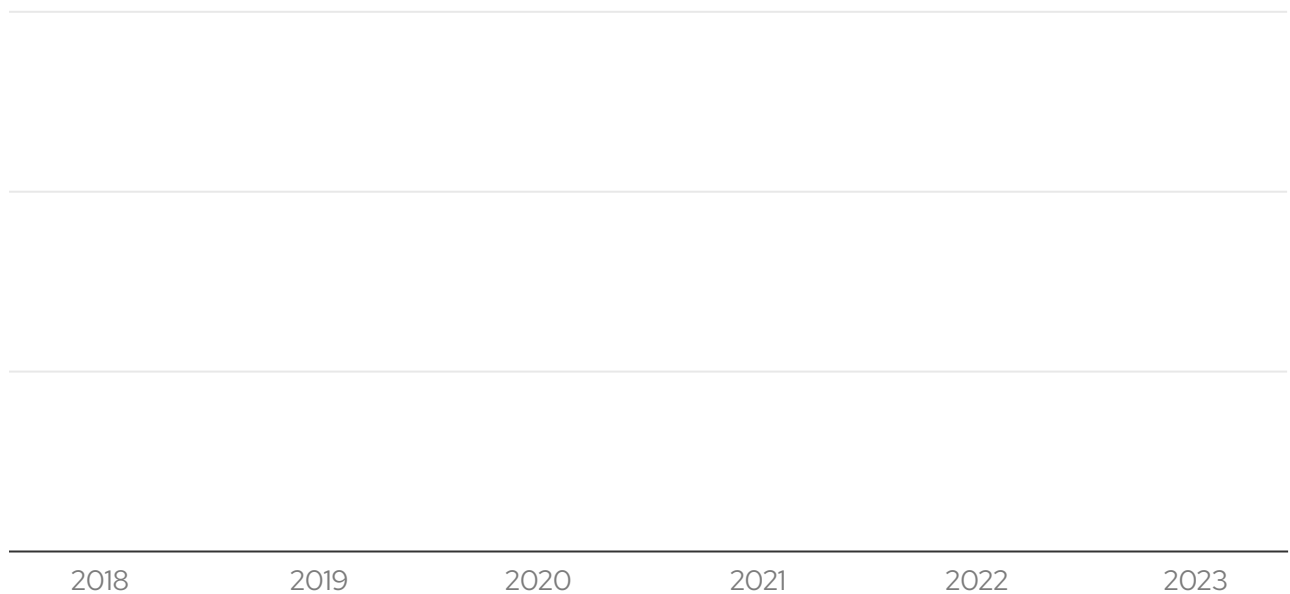
Deaths due to superbugs

Some 1.14 million deaths worldwide are directly caused by antibiotic resistance, and nearly 5 million are associated with it.

The number of deaths and infections due to antibiotic resistance in the UK has been slowly rising. There were 66,730 serious antibiotic-resistant infections in 2023, up from 58,224 in 2022, according to the UK Health Security Agency. The number of deaths caused by these infections was estimated at 2,640 in 2023 – a 10 per cent rise since 2019, when 2,393 people died.

Antibiotic resistant infections on the rise

Number of antibiotic resistant infections per year



Source: UKHSA

Most of the infections (65 per cent) were caused by *E. coli*, which often leads to [urinary tract infections](#), diarrhoea, vomiting and fever. “Antibiotic resistance in *E coli* bacteria is a huge human health problem,” Nunan said.

Antibiotic resistant bacteria are less likely to respond to treatment and can cause serious complications including bloodstream infections, sepsis and hospitalisation, according to the UK Health Security Agency. Death within 30 days is also more likely compared with those who have an infection that responds to antibiotics.

“Intensive farming is bad for animals and it’s bad for human health,” Jackson said.

Parts of diseased birds eaten by Britons

Studies have found that the health problems found in Frankenchickens can affect the quality of the meat that ends up in supermarkets.

The presence of abnormalities and diseases identified in the Food Standards Agency data does not always mean the animal is rejected for human consumption. Sometimes hock burns on animals' legs get cut off and other parts of the chicken are sold.

“The customer is not only potentially getting meat from the shelf that might have some kind of bacteria on it, but also they don't necessarily know whether the animal had a health problem or not, because it's been removed cosmetically.



Supporters gathering outside the High Court for a hearing on Frankenchickens (Photo: @sammivegan)

“It is quite well known in the industry that they remove things like hock burns because they know that consumers would find it unappealing.”

A study by the Humane League found that 85 per cent of chicken sold in UK supermarkets had “white striping” – a muscle disease that manifests in stripes running through the meat due to a lack of blood supply to the chicken's muscles.

Wooden breast myopathy – a condition where muscle cells have died – is tricky to spot and if it is not caught it can end up with consumers eating hard chicken with a poorer taste, Parkes said.

Supermarkets under pressure

Supermarkets are being urged by charities and campaigners to stop selling Frankenchickens.

Of the major supermarket chains, so far just M&S and Waitrose have committed to implementing this by the end of 2026. They are among 130 companies that have signed up to the Better Chicken Commitment, a series of pledges to improve chicken welfare which also includes giving the birds more space on farms.

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If widely adopted, the measures would improve the baseline standards for most chickens sold in the UK, Jackson said. Buying organic chicken is still likely to mean eating a chicken kept in better conditions, but this is more expensive for families, Jackson said.

The Humane League and the RSPCA took Defra to court to try to get Frankenchickens banned on British farms, but the case was dismissed last year.

However, in his ruling the judge opened up the potential for farms to be prosecuted. Gifford said the Humane League is in talks about a potential case with a criminal barrister. The judge who presided over the case said that the welfare of chickens could not be “traded off against the economic interests of farmers”.

A spokesperson for the British Poultry Council, which represents the poultry meat industry, said they produce a billion birds a year for food in the UK, and the percentage of birds with diseases and abnormalities is very small and within regulatory thresholds.

They said all breeds face challenges and antibiotic use in the poultry meat sector has fallen 81 per cent since 2012.