

News Release

March 28, 2008

Salmonella cases linked to raw, frozen chicken entrees

Consumers urged to cook raw chicken products thoroughly and to avoid using microwave

State health and agriculture officials said today that two recent cases of salmonellosis in Minnesota have been linked to raw, frozen, breaded and pre-browned, stuffed chicken entrees. The implicated product is Milford Valley Farms Chicken Cordon Bleu with a stamped code of C8021. This product is sold at many different grocery store chains.

This is the fifth outbreak of salmonellosis in Minnesota linked to these types of products since 1998. The findings prompted the officials to urge consumers to make sure that all raw poultry products are handled carefully and cooked thoroughly, and to avoid cooking raw chicken products in the microwave because of the risk of undercooking.

Investigators from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) determined that two cases of *Salmonella* infection from February and March 2008 were due to the same strain of *Salmonella* Enteritidis. The illnesses occurred in a teenager and a young adult, both from greater Minnesota; both were hospitalized but have since recovered.

“Our DNA fingerprinting found that the two individuals were sickened by the same strain of *Salmonella*,” said Dr. Kirk Smith, supervisor of the Foodborne Disease Unit at MDH. “We purchased the same type of product eaten by the individuals, and the outbreak strain of *Salmonella* was found in three packages of this product.”

Salmonella is sometimes present in raw chicken, which is why it is important for consumers to follow safe food-handling practices. This includes cooking all raw poultry products to an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees Fahrenheit. “The problem arises when consumers don’t realize that they are preparing a raw product,” according to MDA Dairy and Food Inspection Director Dr. Heidi Kassenborg.

“The frozen chicken entrees in the outbreaks we’ve seen in Minnesota are breaded, pre-browned and individually wrapped, so it’s likely most ill consumers mistakenly assumed they have been precooked,” Kassenborg said. “Although the wrapper includes instructions to fully cook the product, some consumers might have overlooked that information and simply heated it in a microwave.”

These types of products previously were marketed as microwaveable, but outbreaks in Minnesota in previous years prompted policy changes by the United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service, which regulates the manufacturers of this type of product. Because of the inherent variability of microwave cooking, using this method to prepare raw frozen product can frequently result in undercooking of the product. Brands of product most commonly available in Minnesota are no longer being marketed as microwaveable. State officials are concerned, however, that consumers of this product may still use microwave ovens for this product, out of habit.

Other important food handling practices include hand washing before and after handling raw meat, keeping raw and cooked foods separate to avoid cross-contamination, and placing cooked meat on a clean plate or platter before serving. Consumers can find more information about safe food-handling practices on the MDA Web site at: <http://www.mda.state.mn.us/food/safety/foodsafety.htm>.

It's important to note that because *Salmonella* is not considered an adulterant in raw poultry, no recall is required according to federal guidelines. MDA and MDH officials advised that consumers with these products in their freezers, if they choose to use them, should cook them thoroughly.

Symptoms of salmonellosis include diarrhea, abdominal pain and cramps and fever. Symptoms usually begin within 12 to 72 hours after exposure, but can begin up to a week after exposure. *Salmonella* infections usually resolve in 5-7 days, but approximately 20 percent of cases require hospitalization. In rare cases, *Salmonella* infection can lead to death, particularly in the elderly or those with weakened immune systems.

Approximately 575 to 700 cases of salmonellosis are reported each year in Minnesota. More information on *Salmonella* and how to prevent it can be found on the MDH Web site at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/salmonellosis/index.html>.