

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICROBIOLOGICAL SAFETY OF FOOD**INFORMATION PAPER****FSA SURVEY OF CAMPYLOBACTER ON FRESH CHICKEN BOUGHT AT
RETAIL OUTLETS (QUARTER THREE RESULTS)**

The FSA published the latest set of results from Quarter 3 of Year 2 of the Retail Survey on Thursday, 26th May 2016.

Overall results from 1009 chickens sampled over the period from January 2016 to March 2016, show that:

- 50.0% of chicken skin samples were positive for Campylobacter at any level of contamination.
- 9.3% of chicken skin samples showed values above 1000 cfu/g.
- In terms of packaging results, 4.2% of packaging samples were positive for Campylobacter and 0.1% (1 sample) of packaging samples had a level of Campylobacter above 1000 cfu/swab.
- These new data showed a further reduction in Campylobacter numbers for the highest level of contamination when compared to the same period in last year's survey.
- There was a statistically significant reduction in the percentage of chickens (skin samples) with high levels of Campylobacter over (1000 cfu/g) from 21.8% in Dec 14 - Feb 15 to 9.5% in Dec 15 – Feb 16.
- There was also a statistically significant reduction in the percentage of chickens positive at any level for Campylobacter from 71.0% in Dec 14 - Feb 15 to 49.2% in Dec 15 - Feb 16. (To note here: Sampling of chickens in Year 1 of the survey finished in February 2015, with only a few samples taken in March. Hence for robust like-for-like comparison to last year's survey result, we used the exact same months within this year's survey, i.e. December to February. This only affects the year-on-year comparison, the overall industry figures are based on the sampling months of January to March 2016.)
- The publication only included these overall industry figures but not a breakdown by major retailers individually. This is due to the fact that different approaches to trimming of neck skin by the various processors that supply retailers mean such a comparison is no longer robust. (see below)

At present the protocol for measuring the level of Campylobacter contamination in chickens at retail stipulates testing a sample of 25g of the neck skin. This is in line with the principle of measuring Campylobacter levels on what is generally accepted as the most contaminated part of the chicken carcass. The protocol specifies that should 25g of neck skin not be available, the sample should be "topped up" with breast skin to make up the 25g. The intention here has always been that the majority of the weight of the sample would comprise neck skin.

Over the past nine months, the intervention of trimming of neck skins has 'changed' the sample composition we are analysing and more and more breast skin has had to be used in the 25g neck skin sample. This is particularly important as evidence from the survey shows that samples containing the most breast skin tend to result less often in Campylobacter levels of >1000 cfu/g.

As such this trend of increasing trimming of neck skin, while being a positive development as it removes a highly contaminated part of the bird, is compromising our ability to make like-for-like comparisons over time, on the basis of the current survey protocol. In the same way, as the amount of breast skin which has to be used in the chicken samples has increased to a much larger degree for some retailers than for others, our ability to make like-for-like comparisons between retailers has also been compromised, hence the retailer breakdown was not included in this edition of the report.

Publication in the current format is only a temporary measure while we develop a revised analytical protocol that will provide a new sampling site on the chicken carcass that restores the robustness of the comparative data.

Sampling was suspended in April to allow for a revised analytical sampling protocol to be developed by PHE. We intend to re-commence the retail survey in August under the new revised protocol. The first results from this new survey can be expected in January 2017 and will be published under the standard format including a breakdown of results attributed to the major retailers. The industry is aware and involved in the development of this new protocol via a working group.

Survey report available at:

<http://www.food.gov.uk/news-updates/news/2016/15162/campylobacter-quarter-3-results-published>

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