Expert Warns of ‘Serious’ Public Health Concern As Lab Detects Multi-Resistant ‘Superbugs’ In 58% of Lidl’s British Chicken Meat

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The results of a microbiological test performed by an independent, accredited laboratory in Germany show that more than half of the fresh chicken products sold in Lidl GB contain antibiotic-resistant ‘superbugs.’ The investigation was commissioned by several animal welfare charities including Open Cages which, alongside leading antimicrobial experts, says that poor animal welfare is one of the biggest drivers of antibiotic resistance and a threat to public health.

The test examined 40 fresh chicken products sold in Lidl’s UK stores under its flagship “Birchwood British” chicken brand. The products were purchased in 5 different stores across the UK. **The lab found:**

- **Multi-resistant bacteria (ESBL or MRSA) on 23 products (58%) - bacteria that no longer respond to antimicrobial treatment, making infections difficult or impossible to treat,**
- **Faecal bacteria E-Coli on 19 products (47.5%) - a strand of which recently caused more than a hundred people in the UK to become ill, and Listeria on 12 products (30%).**

Resistant bacteria can cause serious infections which might not respond to antibiotics. They can also spread antibiotic resistance to other bacteria in your body, causing resistant sicknesses in the future.

ESBL is a type of enzyme or chemical produced by some germs that most commonly infect the gut and urinary tract. MRSA is a type of bacteria that can cause serious infections and lead to painful and swollen skin, a high temperature, and difficulty breathing if it gets into the body.

Superbugs in meat - a "worrying trend"

“The presence of multi-resistant bacteria in meat is a worrying trend and represents a serious public health concern”, **says Timothy Walsh, Professor of Medical Microbiology and Antibiotic Resistance at the University of Oxford.** *“People can get ill from processing and consuming contaminated meat, and the use of human antibiotics in animal production can have a profound long-term effect on the effectiveness of antibiotics to treat human infections.”*

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) occurs when bacteria mutate or acquire genes that allow them to survive exposure to antimicrobials. Over time, bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics can spread, making treatments either more difficult or entirely ineffective. This also elevates risks for surgery, C-sections, and chemotherapy.

Experts estimate that 1.27 million people worldwide died in 2019 from drug-resistant infections with a further 4.95 million dying of antibiotic-resistant associated infections. In the UK, around 58 000 people had an antibiotic-resistant infection in 2022 and 2,200 die from it every year. The scale of the issue led the World Health Organisation to classify antimicrobial resistance as one of the top 10 global public health threats.

Dangerous pathogens from poor animal welfare

According to experts like Professor Walsh, one of the major causes of resistant bacteria in chicken meat is the use of fast-growing breeds - a practice which is criticised by animal welfare charities like Open Cages. “Frankenchickens” have been selectively bred to produce a lot of meat in the shortest possible time. As a result of their fast growth, these birds have very weak immune systems which makes them prone to contracting numerous infections and diseases.

Professor Walsh comments: *“Poor animal welfare is one of the major catalysts for the use of antibiotics and subsequent drivers of antibiotic resistance. Improving animal welfare, such as adopting slower-growing breeds in line with the Better Chicken Commitment, can significantly reduce the need for antibiotics to be given to the birds in the first place. UK supermarkets have a responsibility and obligation to ensure that the meat sold is safe for consumption and free from antibiotic-resistant pathogens.”*

A way forward with the Better Chicken Commitment

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The Better Chicken Commitment (BCC), a set of welfare measures designed by animal welfare specialists, prohibits the use of fast-growing breeds. Data from the Dutch broiler industry shows that slower-growing chickens require nine times fewer antibiotics. Lidl, who has recently committed to giving more space to chickens in line with one of the BCC requirements, hasn't voiced any intention to change the breeds they sell yet.

Connor Jackson, CEO of Open Cages, explains: *"For years we have asked retailers like Lidl to stop selling fast-growing chickens. These alarming new findings reveal that this is no longer only about animal welfare: we are all paying the price. According to the tests, a Lidl customer has a one in two chance of taking potentially life threatening superbugs into their homes. That's like flipping a coin. Are we really OK with that? Is cheap meat really worth the risk to our health?"*

Changes in farming practices could have large-scale implications for reducing the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria: 73% of all antimicrobials sold globally in 2017 were for farmed animals, which makes factory farms a main driver of antibiotic resistance.

Hundreds of companies have already agreed to stop selling fast-growing chickens including M&S, Waitrose, KFC, Nando's, all French major supermarkets and even Lidl in France, Belgium and Denmark.

END

Information about the laboratory can be communicated upon request. We are maintaining the lab's anonymity publicly due to their commercial relationship with the chicken industry.

Links:

- Full report and lab results
- Photos from an intensive chicken farm

Please credit Open Cages for both.

About Timothy Walsh:

Professor Timothy R. Walsh, OBE is Research Director of Biology at the Ineos Oxford Institute for Antimicrobial Research and Professor of Medical Microbiology in the Department of Biology at Oxford University. He has been studying antimicrobial resistance (AMR) mechanisms for over 25 years.

Media contact:
Connor Jackson, Co-founder
Open Cages
connor.jackson@opencages.org
07504580011

Company Contact:

Open Cages

T. 07504580011
E. connor.jackson@opencages.org
W. https://opencages.org/

Additional Contact(s):
contact@opencages.org

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