FACT SHEET · A FARM FORWARD ANALYSIS OF FEDERAL AND INDUSTRY DATA

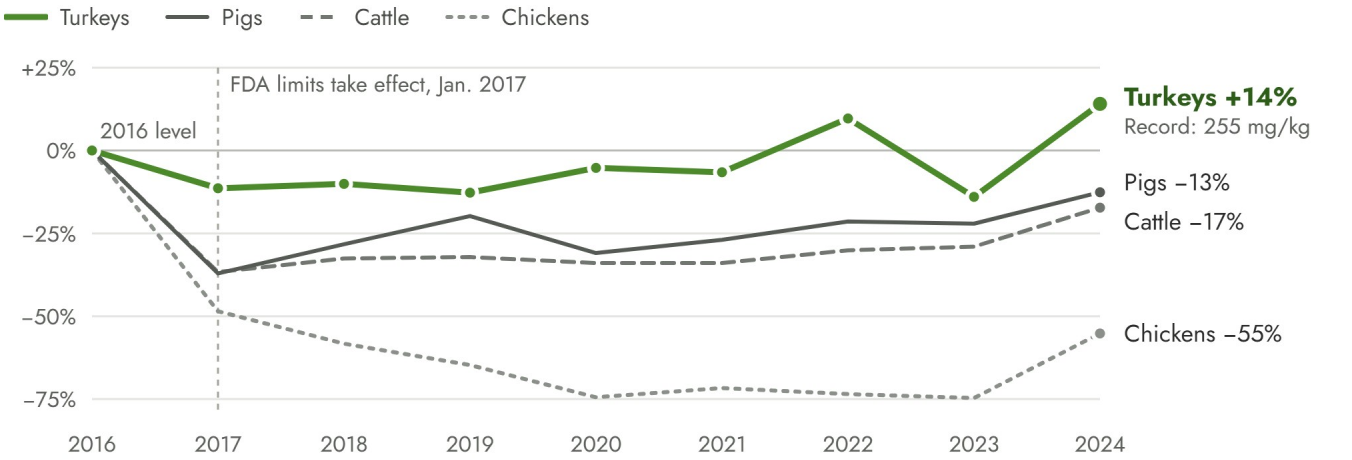
The Most Medicated Bird on the Table

Nearly a decade after the FDA's voluntary reforms, antibiotic sales for turkeys, relative to the birds' weight, are at the highest level in the FDA's data.

Only turkeys' antibiotic sales per pound of bird have risen since 2016

In January 2017, voluntary FDA limits took effect that ended the use of medically important antibiotics to make farm animals grow faster and put their use in feed and water under a veterinarian's oversight. Sales of these drugs for farmed animals fell by a third from 2016 to 2017. Since 2016, sales per kilogram of animal have fallen for pigs (–13%), cattle (–17%), and chickens (–55%). But for turkeys, they rose 14%, to 255 milligrams per kilogram in 2024, the highest in the FDA's weight-adjusted data and up 33% in a single year.[1]

Figure 1. Change since 2016 in medically important antibiotics sold per kilogram of animal, by species



Source: FDA sales and biomass data, 2016–2024; Farm Forward calculation. Each line compares a species only with its own 2016 level, avoiding the cross-species comparisons the FDA cautions against.[2]

By the numbers

146 mg — **Most per pound of meat.** In 2024, 146 milligrams of medically important antibiotics were sold per pound of turkey produced, compared with 109 for pork, 108 for beef, and 6 for chicken.[3]

+65% — **A record tetracycline surge.** Tetracycline sales for turkeys jumped 65% in 2024 to a record high. The industry's own data show tetracycline in feed more than tripled from 2022 to 2024.[4]

81% — **A record share of penicillins.** In 2024, four of every five kilograms of penicillins sold for U.S. food animals (81%) were sold for turkeys, up from 61% to 66% a year in 2016–2020.[5]

11% — **Double the share.** Turkey was 5% of U.S. meat and poultry production in 2024 but accounted for 11% of the medically important antibiotics sold for farmed animals.[6]

Brief history of how antibiotics are regulated in farmed animals

The FDA classifies antibiotics as "medically important" when they are important in human medicine. About nine in ten kilograms sold for turkeys in 2024 were penicillins or tetracyclines, the drug families that include amoxicillin and doxycycline.[7] In 1977, the FDA proposed restricting penicillin and tetracyclines in animal feed to protect their effectiveness in human medicine. But the agency never acted, withdrawing the proposals in 2011.[8] In 2013, the FDA asked drug companies to remove growth promotion from the approved uses of medically important antibiotics. However, the same drugs can still be used to treat, control, or prevent disease, and in 2026, the FDA said more than 100 feed antibiotics had no defined limit on how long they could be given; it has asked drug companies to add limits voluntarily. None of these changes addressed how the animals are raised. The World Health Organization (WHO), which calls for ending routine antibiotic use to prevent disease as well as to promote growth, lists "changes in animal housing and husbandry practices" as an alternative.[9]

Why it matters for public health

The WHO says "misuse and overuse of antimicrobials are the main drivers in the development of drug-resistant pathogens."[10] It also warns that antibiotic use in animals is rising worldwide, "driven by a growing demand for foods of animal origin, often produced through intensive animal husbandry."[11] The CDC now estimates that drug-resistant bacteria and fungi cause 9.7 million infections and 50,800 deaths in the U.S. each year.[12] Turkey has been a source of such infections: from 2017 to 2019, a multidrug-resistant strain of salmonella linked to raw turkey products sickened 358 people in 42 states and Washington, D.C., hospitalizing 133. About half of the outbreak bacteria tested carried genes linked to resistance to ampicillin, a penicillin, and about a third to tetracycline, the two drug families that make up most turkey antibiotic sales. Investigators found this drug-resistant strain in live turkeys and in raw turkey meat from 38 different slaughter and processing plants. They reported evidence it had become "widespread within the turkey production industry" and said interventions should target "all parts of the supply chain," including "upstream farm sources."[13]

The industry will say it's the virus, but the system itself makes birds sick

The industry attributes its recent increases in antibiotic use to bacterial infections that follow avian metapneumovirus, a respiratory virus, and to a bacterial skin disease.[14] But those infections have an underlying cause: the birds are bred and housed in ways that make them sick. U.S. farms raised about 194 million turkeys in 2025, and the USDA says "the vast majority" are Broad Breasted Whites "raised intensively for commercial meat production."[15] These birds have been bred to be about twice as heavy at the same age as 1960s turkeys, and that selection has been linked to leg and walking problems and has made natural mating so difficult that the industry relies almost entirely on artificial insemination.[16] In a study of commercial meat turkeys, 7-week-old birds given a painkiller spent significantly more time standing and walking, which the researchers said suggests those behaviors may be painful; an earlier study concluded that hip disorders in adult male turkeys "result in a state of chronic pain."[17] In a 2010 USDA survey, about 42% of turkey farms reported clostridial dermatitis, the skin disease, in the previous year, and studies cited by the USDA point to crowding, litter conditions, and hygiene as risk factors.[18]

Even the virus's toll depends on how the birds are raised. Antibiotics do not work on viruses, and the *Merck Veterinary Manual* says good management, including ventilation, stocking density, and litter quality, can "markedly decrease the severity" of the infection in turkeys. British producers have dealt with the virus since the 1980s and still cut turkey antibiotic use 82% from 2014 to 2024.[19] U.S. sales have gone the other way, and those antibiotics treat the symptoms of how the birds are raised.

In June 2026, Farm Forward and 64 other groups petitioned the FDA to set reduction targets for antibiotic use in each livestock sector; as of October 21, 2026, it had not responded.[20]

Notes

Methods, full data, and calculations are in Farm Forward's data workbook.

1 Sales figures; the FDA says they "do not necessarily reflect how much of the drugs are ultimately used in animals." Farm Forward calculations, milligrams per kilogram in 2016 and 2024: turkeys 223.5 and 255.0; pigs 193.4 and 169.1; cattle 74.4 and 61.6; and chickens 20.4 and 9.2. The previous turkey high was 245.1 in 2022. Turkeys were 192.2 in 2023, so the one-year rise was 32.7%; the 2016–2024 changes were +14.1% for turkeys, –12.6% for pigs, –17.2% for cattle, and –55.2% for chickens. "2017 Summary Report on Antimicrobials Sold or Distributed for Use in Food-Producing Animals," U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), December 2018, 3; "FDA Releases Annual Summary of Sales and Distribution of Antimicrobials in 2024 for Use in Food-Producing Animals," U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), December 5, 2025; "Biomass-Adjusted Antimicrobial Sales and Distribution Data in Food-Producing Animals: Interactive Summary," FDA, December 5, 2025, including the 2016–2024 biomass sales data and populations and weights files; "The Most Medicated Bird on the Table: Data and Calculations," Farm Forward, November 2026, Per_kg_of_animal tab.

2 The FDA says these data "should not be used to make comparisons between animal species or drug classes." Since 2016, turkeys have ranged from 14.0% below to 14.1% above their 2016 level; the other species have stayed 12.6% to 74.7% below. "FDA Launches Interactive Summary of Biomass-Adjusted Antimicrobial Sales Data in Food Animals," FDA, November 29, 2022; Data workbook, Per_kg_of_animal tab.

3 Before rounding: 145.5 milligrams per pound for turkey, 109.1 for pork, 108.0 for beef, and 5.5 for chicken. Production is carcass weight for beef and pork and ready-to-cook weight for poultry; FDA cattle and chicken sales include dairy cows and egg-laying hens. "Livestock and Meat Domestic Data: Documentation," USDA Economic Research Service (ERS), September 29, 2026; "Antimicrobial Use and Resistance in Animal Agriculture in the United States, 2016–2019," FDA, June 2022, 36–37; Data workbook, Per_pound_of_meat tab.

4 151,814 kilograms in 2023 and 249,768 in 2024 (up 64.5%); the previous high was 192,976 in 2017. The industry data cover more than 72% of U.S. turkey production. "CVM Antimicrobial Sales and Distribution Data 2015–2024," FDA, December 2025, Table 5b; Randall Singer, "Antibiotic Stewardship Within U.S. Poultry Production, 2013–2024," U.S. Poultry & Egg Association (USPOULTRY), December 2025, 2–3.

5 Turkeys: 390,842 kilograms in 2023 and 426,977 in 2024. All other food animals: 223,777 and 103,244. Turkeys' share was 80.5% in 2024 and 61.3% to 65.8% a year in 2016–2020. CVM sales data, Tables 2b and 5b; Data workbook, FDA_turkey_by_class tab.

6 745,309 of 7,096,577 kilograms (10.5%) in the FDA's 2024 species estimates; 5,121 million of 107,625 million pounds (4.8%) of 2024 red meat and poultry production. CVM sales data, Table 4b; Russell Knight et al., "Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry Outlook: September 2025," LDP-M-375, ERS, September 18, 2025; Data workbook, Per_pound_of_meat tab.

7 Penicillins (426,977 kilograms) and tetracyclines (249,768) were 90.8% of the 745,309 kilograms sold for turkeys. "CVM GFI #152," FDA, August 2026, Appendix A, Table A2; CVM sales data, Tables 4b and 5b.

8 "Withdrawal of Notices of Opportunity for a Hearing; Penicillin and Tetracycline Used in Animal Feed," 76 Fed. Reg. 79697 (December 22, 2011).

9 "Timeline of FDA Action on Antimicrobial Resistance," FDA, May 22, 2024, 2013 and 2017 entries; "FDA Finalizes Guidance on Defining Durations of Use for Certain Medically Important Antimicrobial Drugs for Food-Producing Animals," FDA, February 12, 2026; "Stop Using Antibiotics in Healthy Animals to Prevent the Spread of Antibiotic Resistance," World Health Organization (WHO), November 7, 2017.

10 "Antimicrobial Resistance: Key Facts," WHO, accessed October 21, 2026.

11 "Stop Using Antibiotics in Healthy Animals," WHO.

12 Estimates are for 2023. The 2019 report estimated 2.8 million infections and 35,000 deaths; the CDC says its data sources and methods changed substantially after 2019 and that the two reports should not be directly compared. "Antimicrobial Resistance Threats Report," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), October 2026; "Antibiotic Resistance Threats in the United States, 2019," CDC, November 2019.

13 Case counts are from the CDC's final update; the MMWR article reports 356 ill and 132 hospitalized. "Outbreak of Multidrug-Resistant Salmonella Infections Linked to Raw Turkey Products," CDC, April 30, 2019; Rashida Hassan et al., "Multistate Outbreak of Salmonella Infections Linked to Raw Turkey Products – United States, 2017–2019," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 68, no. 46 (2019): 1045–1049.

14 Singer, "Antibiotic Stewardship Within U.S. Poultry Production," 2–3; "On-Farm Antimicrobial Usage in Turkey Production," Mindwalk Consulting Group, accessed October 21, 2026.

15 "Turkeys Raised," USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), September 25, 2026; "FAD PReP Poultry Industry Manual," USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), March 2013.

16 G. B. Havenstein et al., "Comparison of the Performance of 1966- Versus 2003-Type Turkeys When Fed Representative 1966 and 2003 Turkey Diets: Growth Rate, Livability, and Feed Conversion," *Poultry Science* 86, no. 2 (2007): 232–240; on leg and walking problems, see Buchwalder and Huber-Eicher in note 17; Tara Weaver, "Spotting Top-Notch Toms," *Agricultural Research*, USDA Agricultural Research Service, July 1998.

17 T. Buchwalder and B. Huber-Eicher, "Effect of the Analgesic Butorphanol on Activity Behaviour in Turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*)," *Research in Veterinary Science* 79 (2005): 239–244; I. J. H. Duncan et al., "Assessment of Pain Associated with Degenerative Hip Disorders in Adult Male Turkeys," *Research in Veterinary Science* 50 (1991): 200–203.

18 Farm Forward sum of farms reporting slight (20.1%), moderate (13.2%), or severe (9.0%) disease, 42.3% in all. "Clostridial Dermatitis in U.S. Commercial Turkeys and Broilers," APHIS, November 2011.

19 UK turkey use was 108.1 milligrams per kilogram in 2014 and 19.7 in 2024, a decline of 81.8%. Silke Rautenschlein, "Avian Metapneumovirus Infection," *Merck Veterinary Manual*, November 2024; I. V. Goraichuk et al., "Introduction of Avian Metapneumovirus Subtype A to the United States: Molecular Insights and Implications," *Frontiers in Microbiology* 15 (2024): 1428248; "UK-VARSS 2024 Supplementary Material 1," Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD), November 18, 2025, Table S2.2.2.

20 No FDA response appeared in FDA announcements or news coverage through October 21, 2026. "Citizen Petition to the Food & Drug Administration to Protect Public Health from Unsafe Uses of Antibiotics in Livestock & Poultry," Earthjustice et al., June 16, 2026; "65 Organizations Urge FDA to End Routine Antibiotic Use in Livestock Operations," Earthjustice, June 16, 2026.