



The surveillance programme for *Campylobacter* spp. in broiler flocks in Norway 2023



REPORT 21/2024

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Suggested citation

Pettersen, Kristin, Austbø, Lars, Gjerset, Britt, Bergsjø, Bjarne. The surveillance programme for *Campylobacter spp.* in broiler flocks in Norway 2023. Surveillance program report. Veterinærinstituttet 2024. © Norwegian Veterinary Institute, copy permitted with citation

Quality controlled by

Merete Hofshagen, Director of Animal Health, Animal Welfare and Food Safety, Norwegian Veterinary Institute

Published

2024 on www.vetinst.no

ISSN 1890-3290 (electronic edition)

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Commissioned by

Norwegian Food Safety Authority



Colophon

Cover design: Reine Linjer

Cover photo: Colourbox

www.vetinst.no

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Summary

Surveillance in 2023 showed that a total of 128 flocks (6.1%) tested positive for *Campylobacter* spp. when all broiler flocks slaughtered before 51 days of age during the period 1st of May - 31st of October were tested. In total 2 100 flocks from 505 farms were sampled. Of all farms sampled, 83 (16.4%) had at least one positive flock, and of these, 28 had two or more positive flocks. The majority of the positive flocks comes from farms having more than one positive flock and even though these farms only represent 5.5% (28/505) of all farms tested, they contributed with 57.0% (73/128) of all positive flocks tested in 2023.

The carcasses from the positive flocks were either heat treated or frozen for a minimum of three weeks before being marketed. This year's result is within the range from 2020 - 2022 with 6.1%, 5.8% and 4.8% positive flocks, respectively. The prevalence is still very low, compared to most other European countries.

Introduction

Campylobacteriosis is currently the most commonly reported bacterial infectious disease in the Norwegian human population ([Campylobacteriose](#)). In 2020 and 2021 most of the human campylobacteriosis infections were acquired in Norway, probably due to the restricted travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The total number of infections registered in the Norwegian human population was also lower in 2020 and 2021 compared to previous years. In 2022, there was an increase in human campylobacteriosis acquired from abroad and from unknown geographical area, while the number of campylobacter infections acquired in Norway was lower compared to 2020 and 2021. In 2023, the total number of human campylobacter infections registered in MSIS is the same as in 2022 (approximately 3000 cases). However, the number of infection cases in the two categories originated from Norway versus abroad has increased to approximately 1 200 cases each, while the category of cases originated from unknown origin is reduced to approximately 600 cases. Consumption of poultry meat purchased raw has been identified as a significant risk factor together with drinking non-disinfected water, eating at barbecues, occupational exposure to animals, and eating undercooked pork (1).

The action plan regarding *Campylobacter* spp. in Norwegian broilers has been running since spring 2001 (2). The action plan is a joint effort involving several stakeholder groups from "stable-to-table". The Norwegian Food Safety Authority (NFSA) is responsible for implementing the surveillance programme, while the Norwegian Veterinary Institute (NVI) coordinates the programme, performs the laboratory investigations, analyses the data and communicates the results. The carcasses from positive flocks are either frozen for a minimum of three weeks or heat treated before being marketed.

The action plan is updated regularly, and the details for 2024 together with reports and plans from previous years can be found at <https://www.vetinst.no/overvaking/campylobacter-fjorfe>.

Aims

The objective is to reduce the human exposure to thermophilic *Campylobacter* spp. from Norwegian broiler meat products.

Materials and Methods

In 2023, all Norwegian broiler flocks slaughtered before 51 days of age during the period 1st of May - 31st of October were sampled by the owner or the keeper. The sampling was performed maximum six days before slaughter. When correctly sampled, one sample consisted of ten pooled swabs from fresh faecal/caecal droppings. The samples were analysed by real-time PCR for detection of *Campylobacter* spp. at the NVI (3). In general, the test results could be accessed within one working day through a shared database (EOS). All positive test results are also reported individually to the Norwegian Food Safety Authority (NFSA), the slaughterhouse and the farmer.

In the case of undetermined status for a flock at the time of slaughter, caeca from ten broilers per flock were sampled at the slaughterhouse for cultivation at NVI. This is to ensure correct follow up of the flock.

The carcasses from all positive flocks are either frozen for a minimum of three weeks or heat treated before being marketed.

Results and Discussion

In 2023, 2 100 flock samples were analysed for *Campylobacter* spp, representing 505 farms. A total of 128 flocks (6.1%) tested positive for *Campylobacter* spp. Seven of the 2 100 flocks were sampled at the slaughter house for cultivation due to unknown status at the time of slaughter, and none of these were confirmed positive for *Campylobacter* spp.

The positive flocks originated from 83 (16.4%) of the farms. Of those farms having more than one positive flock, 18 farms had two positive flocks, seven farms had three positive flocks, one farms had four positive flocks and 2 farms had six positive flocks. This shows that 28 (33.7%) of the farms where *Campylobacter* was detected had more than one positive flock. Even though these farms only represent 5.5% (28/505) of all farms tested, they contributed with 57.0% (73/128) of all positive flocks detected in 2023.

The percent of *Campylobacter* positive flocks has varied substantially since the action plan was launched (Figure 1 and 2).

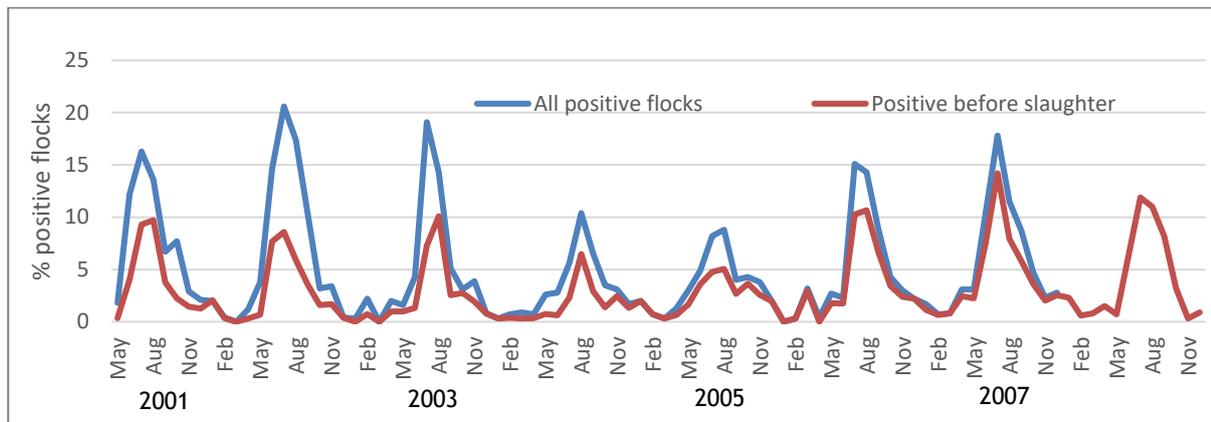


Figure 1. Monthly incidence of *Campylobacter* spp. in slaughtered Norwegian broiler flocks from May 2001 throughout 2008. The blue line represents flocks positive for *Campylobacter* spp., these data are based on two test results; before slaughter and at slaughter. The red line represents flocks tested positive for *Campylobacter* spp. at the sampling at farm before slaughter (from 2005 onwards: sampling approx. four days before slaughter).

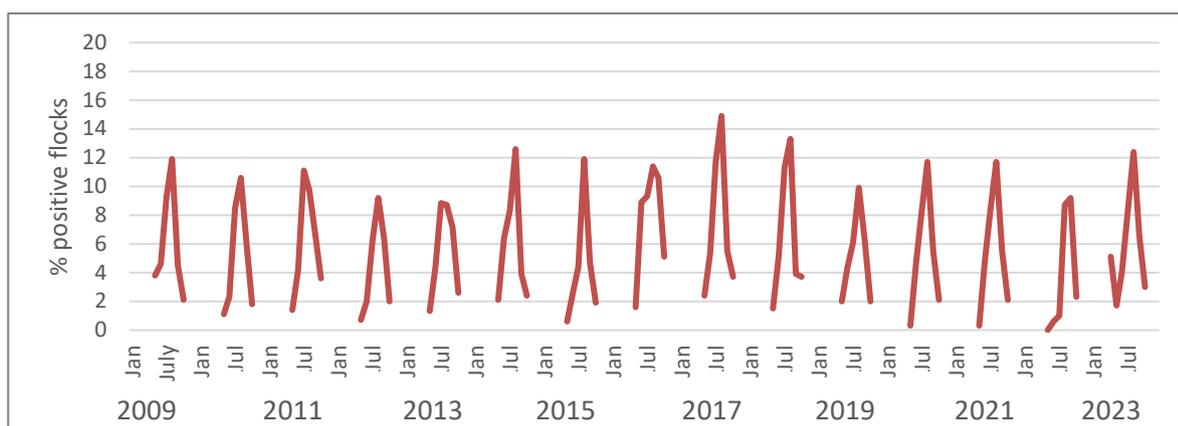


Figure 2. Monthly incidence of *Campylobacter* spp. in Norwegian broiler flocks from May throughout October 2009 - 2023. The red line represents flocks positive for *Campylobacter* spp. when sampled at farm before slaughter.

The results for 2002 - 2007, when all flocks were sampled twice, are presented in Table 1 along with the results of 2008 when the sampling was performed all year but only close to slaughter. Up to and including February 2005, samples prior to slaughter were taken approximately eight days before slaughter. At that time, approximately 50% of the positive flocks were detected only by the sampling and testing at slaughter. From 1st of March 2005 and onwards, all flocks were sampled maximum four days before slaughter, and in 2005, 31.8% of the positive flocks were detected at slaughter only. In 2006 this was further reduced to 25.3%, and in 2007 the corresponding figure was 24.5%. This confirms the importance of sampling close to the slaughter date for the detection of *Campylobacter* positive flocks.

From 2008, the sampling at slaughter was terminated, and more recent data to calculate the number of *Campylobacter* positive flocks going on the market without being frozen or heat treated are therefore lacking. Calculations was made assuming that 2008 - 2015 equals 2007

with respect to the proportion of positive flocks being identified before slaughter (approx. 75%), the seasonal distribution (approx. 80% of positive flocks are slaughtered during the six summer months) and that the number of samples equals the number of flocks (Table 1 and 2).

Table 1. Results from the Action Plan against *Campylobacter* spp. in broilers in the period 2002 - 2008.

Year	Number of sampled flocks	Number (%) of positive flocks	Number of positive flocks discovered at slaughter only*
2002	3 627	228 (6.3)	127
2003	3 550	175 (4.9)	85
2004	3 626	118 (3.3)	58
2005	3 652	132 (3.6)	42
2006	3 908	190 (4.9)	48
2007	4 145	237 (5.7)	58
2008	4 675	193 (4.1)	64**

* This is the maximum number of flocks positive for *Campylobacter* spp. which had the possibility to reach the market without previous freezing or heat treatment.

** For 2008 this is the estimated maximum number of flocks positive for *Campylobacter* spp. which had the possibility to reach the market without previous freezing or heat treatment.

Table 2. Results and estimated results from the Action Plan against *Campylobacter* spp. in broilers in the period 2009 - 2023.

Year	Number. of tested / positive (%) samples*	Estimated number of flocks the whole year**	Estimated number (%) of positive flocks per year	Estimated number of not identified positive flocks***
2009	1 924 / 117 (6.1)	4 000	195 (4.9)	78
2010	2 170 / 110 (5.1)	4 400	184 (4.2)	74
2011	2 282 / 139 (6.1)	4 560	232 (5.1)	93
2012	2 417 / 106 (4.4)	4 830	177 (3.7)	71
2013	2 710 / 149 (5.5)	5 420	248 (4.6)	99
2014	2 685 / 160 (6.0)	5 370	267 (5.0)	107
2015	2 133 / 93 (4.4)	4 260	155 (3.6)	62
2016	2 262 / 175 (7.7)	ND	ND	ND
2017	1 919 / 136 (7.1)	ND	ND	ND
2018	1 986 / 126 (6.3)	ND	ND	ND
2019	2 018 / 103 (5.1)	ND	ND	ND
2020	1 893 / 115 (6.1)	ND	ND	ND
2021	1 891 / 110 (5.8)	ND	ND	ND
2022	2 189 / 106 (4.8)	ND	ND	ND
2023	2 100 / 128 (6.1)	ND	ND	ND

* Equals (for 2009-2021 approximately) number of slaughtered / positive flocks.

** In 2009 - 2015, the estimate for the whole year is based upon number of slaughtered flocks in May - October.

*** The estimated maximum number of flocks positive for *Campylobacter* spp. which had the possibility to reach the market without previous freezing or heat treatment.

ND: Not determined.

Estimates of the whole year flock prevalence and the number of flocks positive for *Campylobacter* spp. reaching the market without freezing or heat treatment, have not been calculated since 2015 because no sampling has been done in the action plan during the six “winter months” November - April for the last thirteen years. Estimates would probably be hampered with too many uncertainties to be of much value. Also the fact that the sampling since 2016 was performed a maximum of six days before slaughter, not four days as previous years, adds to the uncertainty of such estimates.

This year’s result of 6.1% is less favourable than the result from 2022 (4.8%) However, the result of 2023 is within the range of the results from 2020 - 2022 with 6.1%, 5.8% and 4.8% positive flocks, respectively. The prevalence is still very low, compared to most other European countries (4).

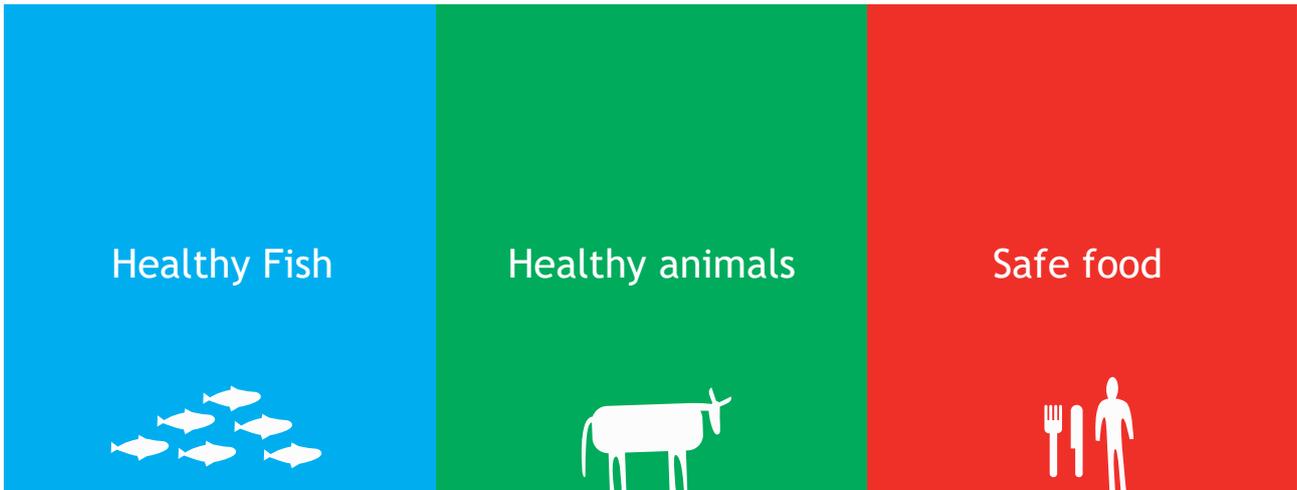
Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank additional colleagues at the NVI for performing and evaluating the analyses with excellence and for excellent assistance in planning and running the program. In particular, Cathrine Arnason Bøe, Dag Grønningen, Vidar Brevig Ahlsen, Elin Johanne Trettenes, Estelle Grønneberg, Faisal Suhel, Kaia Kristine Haugbro, Kathrine Andersen Moan, Cathrine Fjellvang Melvold, Kristin Stangeland Soetaert, Lene Hermansen, Wenche Støldal Gulliksen, Dalina Sol Fernandez, Thea Fatnes and Kristina Kasumacic have contributed substantially to the project.

Moreover, the authors would like to thank all personnel from the Norwegian Food Safety Authority, from the poultry industry and farmers for all effort in sampling and submission of samples.

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