Americans experienced a record number of illnesses in 2016 stemming from chickens kept in their backyards and on their rooftops. And this year, with Salmonella cases swiftly adding up again, if this continues at the present pace we will equal that mark by year's end.

Salmonella, which produces nausea, vomiting, cramps and diarrhea, is a debilitating illness that can also, in some cases for the old and very young, be deadly.

Federal health officials have identified a clear link between the increase in domesticated chickens and the rise in Salmonella incidents. And the statistics indicate that close contact with these adorable chicks and egg-laying birds is accelerating the spread of disease into the home.

Given that almost every state in the country has reported cases, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently issued an advisory warning highlighting that these animals are a potential health threat. So while these birds might be cute and cuddly – and nationwide ownership is apparently growing – if after handling live poultry proper health-protection techniques aren't adhered to, sickness can easily follow.
Through May 25, the CDC reported 372 cases in 47 states and it's currently "investigating eight multi-state outbreaks of human *Salmonella* infections linked to contact with live poultry in backyard flocks," which have resulted in 71 hospitalizations, but luckily no deaths. In addition, the agency said, last year, "a record number of illnesses were linked to contact with backyard poultry" – a total of 895 in all, including three fatalities.

Since housing chickens in rural backyards or on urban roofs isn't usually regulated or documented, it's hard to know even approximately how many non-commercial cooped chickens there are in the U.S. But over the last few years there seems to be a noticeable rise in those who house live poultry, and according to a *Nov. 2014 study* [2], it's taking place in "urban, suburban, and rural areas."

Titled "Backyard chickens in the United States: A survey of flock owners," the study involved nearly 1,500 participants interacting with researchers, who noted that "it has become increasingly popular to keep backyard chickens in the United States," and that there was "a lack of awareness about some poultry health conditions."
A main problem is that many owners and their families are treating baby chicks and ducklings like...
household pets; a CDC survey [3] last year found that nearly half of those stricken with Salmonella admitted to letting them in their homes. And because they are adorable often times kids (and adults alike) snuggle them and put them up to their faces – which is a near sure-fire way of being exposed to the disease if it's present.

Of all the cases this year, 83 percent of Salmonella victims said they had contact with live poultry the week prior to getting sick; 36 percent involved kids five-years old and younger.

Not only is it bad enough for the animals to be in the house, if they get anywhere near the kitchen or other areas where food preparation takes place, germ-covered feathers can easily transmit disease.

The last time eight Salmonella outbreaks occurred in a single year was 2012 (see adjacent graph, courtesy: CDC) and we've already reached that level this year – within the first five months.

To stem the tide of infections and illnesses, the CDC advises that these guidelines [4], among others, be followed:

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water right after touching live poultry or anything in the area where they live and roam. If necessary, use hand sanitizer if washing isn't possible – but then wash ASAP.
- Do not let live poultry inside the house, in bathrooms, or especially in areas where food or drink is prepared, served, or stored, such as kitchens or outdoor patios.
- Children younger than 5 years, adults older than 65, and people with weakened immune systems should not handle or touch chicks, ducklings, or other live poultry. People in these groups are more likely to have a severe illness from Salmonella infection.
- Do not snuggle or kiss the birds, touch your mouth, or eat or drink around live poultry.