

News Column
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For Release 11/02/15
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ANTIBIOTICS IN MEAT?

When Subway announced last week that they planned to start serving antibiotic free meat, my first response was, “Huh? The meat you serve now is already antibiotic free. That won’t be much of a transition!”

Lots of farm folks took Subway’s announcement the way they meant it though – that they would source their meat products only from farms where animals never ever received antibiotics – and it caused a stir on social media for a few days.

Antibiotic free is a noble goal, but maybe a bit misguided. In Subway’s defense, they have backed off a bit and issued a statement recognizing the value of using antibiotics to treat sick animals. That’s why I say their antibiotic free goal is misguided. Even with the best stewardship, some animals get sick and need treatment. Without treatment, they suffer longer and may die, so most of us choose treatment to help the sick recover.

I too want my meat to be free of antibiotic residues, but I honestly don’t give it much thought. When proper withdrawal times are observed, medications will have passed through the animal’s system long before it is harvested for meat.

I don’t pay any attention to the treatment records of the animal’s we slaughter for home consumption, except to be sure we have met the recommended drug withdrawal times. Many of our animals will make it to slaughter without receiving an antibiotic. Some won’t. Meat from both will be antibiotic free.

I don't intend to imply that antibiotic free production is a bad thing. In fact, it is probably a goal for many producers because we make more money if our animals don't get sick and need treatment. On the other hand, I contend that antibiotic free, natural, organic, and conventionally raised products are equally good. And they are all antibiotic free.

Having used an antibiotic while producing an animal doesn't mean there will be antibiotic residue in the meat. If the withdrawal time on the product is observed, the antibiotic will have passed through the animal's system before it is harvested for meat.

Every medication has a withdrawal time listed on the label. That withdrawal time is determined after many years and many millions of dollars spent testing the safety of the product. The withdrawal time is the number of days that must be allowed after the last treatment, before an animal is slaughtered. There won't be drug residues if pre-harvest withdrawal times are observed.

USDA inspectors monitor every animal that goes through a packing plant to assure they are healthy. In addition, random sampling and tissue testing is used to prevent residues from entering the food supply. If a producer has had animals with unacceptable drug residue levels before, then the sampling becomes less random. In other words, animals from repeat offenders are more likely to be "randomly" tested.

As producers, we always need to be looking for ways to do a better job. Maybe we can observe animals more closely, or more often. Or, we might be able to decrease stress, and sickness, in newly weaned calves by preconditioning – vaccinating and working calves at least three weeks before weaning.

For those long-haul calves coming out of the southeast United States, there is probably room for improvement on the sending end. Those calves could be preconditioned, then weaned

and started on feed for a month before being sold and shipped to Kansas feedlots.

My point directed to producers is that we can always do better. And, if we can do better, then we should.

My point to consumers is that the product we are providing in the supermarket is safe. I'm actually much more concerned with what some consumers might do with meat after purchase than I am about what might have happened to it on the farm.

Unfortunately, consumers are faced with conflicting information. We see slick ad campaigns, implying that farmers are putting all kinds of bad things in our food. Then we see facebook posts from our farmer friends saying it isn't so.

I know who I trust. How about you?

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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