

Antibiotics and Poultry Production

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As a result of consumer demand, many restaurants and food retailers have announced that they only will purchase chicken raised without antibiotics. New labeling includes: “antibiotic free”, “raised without antibiotics”, or “no antibiotics ever”. But, what do these terms really mean?

First, all antibiotic residue in meat has been banned since the 1950’s in the United States. Thus, meat already is free of antibiotic residue. Producers accomplish this by complying with antibiotic withdrawal times, which is the time required for antibiotics to work their way out of an animal’s system.

However, some consumers do not understand this and seem to believe that the use of antibiotics in poultry production means there can be antibiotic residue in meat. Also, the use of “antibiotic-free” or “no antibiotics” labels can lead consumers to believe that poultry without those labels contains antibiotics, when in fact no poultry meat contains antibiotics – whether they use those labels or not.

Additionally, some consumers are concerned with the use of antibiotics in poultry production resulting in antibiotic resistant bacteria or “superbugs”. But, this is not the case. There is no evidence that poultry-borne resistant bacteria exist. A “superbug” from antibiotics used in poultry, or from poultry consumption, has never been identified. In actuality, it is a long process from the farm to the table, and it is very hard for bacteria to survive this long process.

The terms defined:

- “raised without antibiotics” – the flock was reared without the use of antibiotics for health maintenance, disease prevention, or treatment of disease; other types of animal health products may be used
- “antibiotic free” – the same as “raised without antibiotics” but this is not allowed on labels since all chicken is antibiotic free; this term is allowed to be used in company marketing materials which are not regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture

Thus, all poultry meat is antibiotic-free. Some poultry companies just choose to put that on their labels.

References:

1. Industry experts weigh-in on antibiotics in poultry production. March 16, 2016. Poultry Times.
2. Chickopedia: What Consumers Need to Know. National Chicken Council.
<http://www.nationalchickencouncil.org/about-the-industry/chickopedia/>