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Antibiotic Resistance: The Unwelcome Guest at Your Holiday Dinner

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As the holidays approach, thoughts inevitably turn to an important part of these celebrations – food, and in particular, turkey. We may also wish to consider the health and environmental impacts of how the meat for our holiday meal is raised.

At Cedar Summit Farm in New Prague, Minnesota, Florence and David Minar are raising turkeys. The turkeys range freely and are not fed antibiotics to promote growth or compensate for unsanitary living conditions. As Florence said, “They chirp and seem very healthy. It’s fun to sit and listen to them”.

The Minars used to raise cows “conventionally,” keeping them in close confinement. They moved away from this method out of concern for the health of the environment, the animals, and their own family. But there was an added benefit. Florence said, “Once we moved the animals outside and started using good husbandry practices, we no longer needed to use antibiotics. Our vet bills dropped by 80 to 90 percent.”

Cedar Summit Farm is not alone. Many producers in Minnesota and across the country are turning to sustainable husbandry practices, raising animals under humane conditions and without the routine use of antibiotics in their animal feed.

Valley’s Family Farms in LaFarge, Wisconsin, produces turkeys (soon to be Organic Valley Family of Farms, now that USDA organic standards for meat are in place), which are also raised sustainably. Birds are grown by the Organic Valley family farm cooperative members, and are free ranging and never fed antibiotics, in accordance with the organic label. As Pam Saunders, Meat Program Coordinator for Organic Valley, says, “When turkeys are fed organic feed and allowed to behave naturally, to be outside, they will be healthier, and they don’t need antibiotics.”

Because any use of antibiotics can contribute to drug resistance developing among bacteria elsewhere, sustainable meat production helps stem the growing crisis of antibiotic resistance. Consumers can do their own part by purchasing meat raised in this manner.

The Risk of Antibiotic Resistance

Antibiotic resistance is a public health crisis and a growing risk to all people. Health professionals report rising numbers of bacterial infections—from ear infections to food poisoning to pneumonia—that do not respond to antibiotics treatment. Antibiotic-resistant bacteria may keep people sick

longer, and sometimes people are unable to recover at all. Children, the elderly and those with weakened immune systems are particularly vulnerable.

Emerging scientific consensus links the overuse of antibiotics in farm animals and fish to resistance transmitted to humans, typically via food. “Feeding healthy cows, chickens and pigs large doses of antibiotics on a routine basis can cause antibiotic resistant bacteria such as *salmonella* and *campylobacter* to enter into our food, resulting in infections that are often difficult and costly to treat with the usual antibiotics,” said Jon Rosenblatt, MD, a microbiologist and infectious disease specialist from Rochester, Minn.

Low levels of antibiotics are routinely fed to animals, not to treat sickness but to spur them to market weight more quickly and to avert infections in animals stressed by crowded and often unsanitary conditions. The latest estimates by the Union of Concerned Scientists are that at least 70 percent of all antibiotics (and possibly more) used in the U.S. each year—more than 24 million pounds—are fed in this manner to healthy pigs, poultry and beef cattle. Most are identical or nearly so to medicines used in human patients. And an estimated 204,000 to 433,000 pounds of antibiotics are also used annually in the production of seafood sold to the U.S., according to a recent report by Dr. Charles Benbrook.

Legislation recently introduced in the U.S. House and Senate would phase out the routine use of certain medically important antibiotics in healthy food animals. The American Medical Association, the American Osteopathic Association and other medical and public health groups endorse these bills.

This important step has already been taken in other countries. Since 1999, the European Union has prohibited use as animal growth promoters of all antibiotics important in human medicine. Meat producers continue to thrive and have adapted by modifying the diet of animals, and by improving animal husbandry to decrease the risk of infection. Data from Denmark show a dramatic decrease in the total animal use of antibiotics since the country banned antibiotic use in healthy livestock, and levels of certain resistant bacteria in animals have also plummeted.

How Do I Know if Meat is Raised Without Antibiotics?

It’s difficult to know exactly how livestock, poultry or fish have been raised from reading the label on the product, but it’s a good place to start. Meat certified by third party inspection, like United States Department of Agriculture’s certified organic label, is the best way to know for sure. Third party certifications involved a very specific set of standards for the producer’s operation, and an outside party must inspect the operation and certify that it meets those standards.

Other certifications that indicate that meat has been raised without routine use of antibiotics are Food Alliance or Midwest Food Alliance, Animal Welfare Institute (for pork) and Free Farmed (from the American Humane Association). Farms and ranches that carry those labels adhere to a set of guiding principles that ensure the environmentally and socially responsible husbandry of animals, including a prohibition on the use of antibiotics for healthy animals.

Perhaps the best way to make sure that the meat you buy has been raised under sustainable conditions and without antibiotics is to get to know the food source. Ask questions at the meat counter of your local grocer, visit the farm, or talk to the farmer at the farmers market. Then sit down at your holiday meal and enjoy knowing where and how your turkey was raised.

For more information on antibiotic-free meat products, check out IATP’s Eat Well Guide.