Meat consumers gain access to information about antibiotic use

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.12.17

U.S. consumers are about to gain a rare look into the use of antibiotics in the food system. It has been a growing concern among public health groups, shoppers and physicians.

Critics have argued that the agricultural industry abuses these medicines. Antibiotics are prescribed to treat illnesses. They say antibiotics go to animals that are not sick, contributing to the rise of antibiotic "superbugs." These are bacteria that cannot be managed with traditional treatments. Studies suggest that these bacteria, which evolve in poultry and livestock, can be passed to humans. Consumer groups have complained that people know too little about how their food is raised.
A new San Francisco, California, city law is changing that. Now, some of the country's top meat and poultry brands will soon have to share more details about their antibiotic use. The rule passed the city's Board of Supervisors unanimously last Tuesday. It will require grocery stores to document antibiotic use in the meat and poultry brands they sell. They will have to make the information available, via a website, to consumers.

The law will affect a number of supermarket chains with branches in San Francisco — including Safeway and Target. It also affects their suppliers, which include Smithfield, Perdue and Tyson.

Both the grocery and meat-processing industries described the new rule as an unfair burden.

Supporters say they hope it will bring much-needed transparency to the national food system.

"We think this is a really important step forward," said Avinash Kar, a lawyer at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "These are national brands, and we have, for the first time, a window into how they use antibiotics."

Like humans, animals raised for meat — including cows, pigs and chickens — receive antibiotics when they're sick. The treatment is to fend off bacterial infections.

The Food and Drug Administration banned the use of antibiotics for the sole purpose of promoting growth earlier this year. But many animals continue to receive routine, preventive doses of antibiotics. On factory farms, animals live close together and disease spreads more quickly. The treatment is designed to keep illnesses from spreading.

These uses do not pose an immediate threat to human health. Federal law regulates the safety of antibiotics on the market. The timing of dosages is controlled to make sure the medicine does not linger in food.

Recently, however, public health and environmental groups have warned that high rates of antibiotic use in animals may contribute to the evolution of antibiotic-resistant "superbugs."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says 2 million people are sickened every year by antibiotic-resistant bacteria. That includes illness from any source.
And demand for antibiotic-free meat is growing among consumers.

A 2016 report by Nielsen found that sales of "antibiotic-free meat" grew nearly 29 percent each year between 2011 and 2015. Growth was just under 5 percent for traditional meat. An earlier survey by Consumer Reports found 86 percent of consumers wanted meats raised without routine antibiotics.

In response, a number of brands have taken steps to reduce or end the use of antibiotics.

The San Francisco law seeks to push the industry further. It will require grocery stores to document — for each brand — the average number of days each animal received antibiotics. They also will have to list the percentage of animals affected and the total volume of antibiotics given by that brand.

The rule applies only to grocery stores with at least one location in San Francisco and a worldwide total of 25 stores or more. That includes national chains Safeway, Target, Costco, Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Walgreens and CVS. So the effect could be felt much further. National meat brands that sell at those stores will also have to say how they use antibiotics.

"Consumers really care about this issue, and they have a lot of influence on the marketplace," Kar said. "So we hope that will push companies in the direction of better antibiotic-use practices."

But the North American Meat Institute, a national trade organization, and the California Grocers Association gave warnings. They said in comments submitted to the Board of Supervisors that the requirements could cause some brands to leave San Francisco. It could make meat and poultry in the city more expensive, they said.

That was the outcome of California's last groundbreaking animal agriculture law. It required that chickens, pigs and cows be raised with more living space. A study at Purdue University found that prices jumped 33 percent after the law went into effect in 2015.

The San Francisco law is "a recipe for failure," said Barry Carpenter. He is the chief executive of the North American Meat Institute. "The significant costs associated with the segregation and record-keeping for meat and poultry products to be sold in San Francisco will increase the cost of meat and poultry." The statement also said they will reduce the meat and poultry options available.
Some farmers worry the movement against antibiotics could turn consumers against their use for any reason.

"I see my cattle every day like some of your readers see their dogs," said James O'Brien, a cattle rancher in South Texas. "If they get sick, I want to treat them. To me, not using antibiotics is the inhumane practice."
Quiz

1. Which two of the following sentences from the article include central ideas of the article?

   1. *Studies suggest that these bacteria, which evolve in poultry and livestock, can be passed to humans.*
   2. *It will require grocery stores to document antibiotic use in the meat and poultry brands they sell.*
   3. *"These are national brands, and we have, for the first time, a window into how they use antibiotics."*
   4. *The Food and Drug Administration banned the use of antibiotics for the sole purpose of promoting growth earlier this year.*

   (A) 1 and 2  
   (B) 2 and 3  
   (C) 1 and 4  
   (D) 3 and 4

2. Read the selection from the section "Some Farmers Are Concerned."

   *"If they get sick, I want to treat them. To me, not using antibiotics is the inhumane practice."*

   How does using the word "inhumane" affect the tone of the selection above?

   (A) It creates a disinterested tone that deflects the implications of the main argument.  
   (B) It creates an urgent tone that supports the main argument of the article.  
   (C) It creates a suspicious tone that questions the main argument of the article.  
   (D) It creates a controversial tone that challenges the main argument of the article.
3 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

(A) The new law has the potential to increase the cost of meat.

(B) The rule applies to all grocery stores with at least one location in San Francisco.

(C) The law will require food producers to be more transparent in their use of antibiotics.

(D) Some farmers are upset about the new regulations.

4 Read the sentence from the section "Some Farmers Are Concerned."

"The significant costs associated with the segregation and record-keeping for meat and poultry products to be sold in San Francisco will increase the cost of meat and poultry."

Which option is the BEST definition of the word "segregation" as used in the sentence?

(A) Isolation from other meat products.

(B) Connection with other meat suppliers.

(C) Discrimination against certain types of meat.

(D) The inclusion of certain antibiotics.
Answer Key

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1. *Studies suggest that these bacteria, which evolve in poultry and livestock, can be passed to humans.*
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