

Expert: Latest food scare avoided with proper handling and cooking

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UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. -- Seems like every month there is a new food scare that makes the national news. Most recently, it was antibiotic-resistant bacterial pathogens found in pork.

But whether pathogens are drug-resistant or not, consumers should know that these microorganisms can be controlled by proper food handling and destroyed by proper cooking, noted a food-safety expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences [1].

Worries about antibiotic-resistant bacteria in pork were triggered by an article in the January 2013 issue of Consumer Reports magazine. The piece described a survey that found antibiotic-resistant bacteria in pork-chop and ground-pork samples. The article suggested that the frequent use of low-dose antibiotics in hog farming may be accelerating the growth of drug-resistant "superbugs" that threaten human health.

The overuse of antibiotics is a concern from an overall public-health perspective, whether those antibiotics are used for animals or for humans, according to Martin Bucknavage, Penn State Extension [2] food-safety specialist. But he explained that eating pork presents the same safety challenges as any other meat.

"All raw meat products -- whether pork, beef, poultry or fish -- have the potential to carry bacterial pathogens, such as Salmonella or E. coli," Bucknavage said. "Therefore, one needs to properly cook and handle raw meat to prevent any potential for illness."

The presence of antibiotic-resistant pathogens in meat is an issue that needs to be addressed through more careful use of antibiotics in livestock, Bucknavage said. But antibiotic resistance adds no special ability for those bacterial pathogens to resist heating and cleaning with sanitizers.

"At the consumer level, these bacteria will be controlled in raw meat the same

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as any other bacteria -- though proper cooking and cleaning," he said.

Bucknavage recommended these steps to minimize the risk of foodborne illness:

-- When cooking pork or any other meat, use a meat thermometer to ensure that it reaches the proper internal temperature, which kills potentially harmful bacteria (at least 145 F for whole cuts and 160 F for ground meat).

-- Keep raw meat and its juices separate from other foods, especially those foods that are eaten raw, such as salad.

-- Wash your hands and any kitchen surfaces or utensils thoroughly after handling or contacting raw meat.

It is true that there is a link between the use of antibiotics in livestock and a higher level of antibiotic-resistant organisms that can be found in meat, Bucknavage pointed out. "However, epidemiological evidence does not show a tie between those organisms and increased human illness," he said.

He noted that the industry has taken many steps to restrict the use of antibiotics in livestock. "To further combat the concern, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration earlier this year released guidance to promote the judicious use of medically important antibiotics in food-producing animals."

That guidance can be found online at <http://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm299802.htm> [3].

Links:

[1] <http://agsci.psu.edu/>

[2]

http://extension.psu.edu/?utm_source=agsci.psu.edu&utm_medium=left+navigation&utm_campaign=top+vs+left+navigation

[3] <http://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm299802.htm>



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