

## 80% of Antibiotics Sold in America Aren't Used to Treat People

*Even antibiotic-free meat doesn't mean animal never had drugs*

Trey Williams | Apr 29, 2015



*80% of antibiotics sold in the U.S. are used on the livestock and poultry that consumers eat.*

You get sick, go to the doctor, take antibiotics and poof, all better. But of all the antibiotics sold in the U.S. each year, 80% are used on food-producing animals — not humans, according to the National Resources Defense Council.

Most of the chicken, beef, pork and turkey Americans consume daily has been pumped with antibiotics to cure sickness, prevent sickness or simply to induce growth.

That is becoming a major public-health issue, as it leads to antibiotic resistance.

Two million Americans contract serious infections caused by antibiotic-resistant bacteria each year, according to The Pew Charitable Trust. That results in approximately 23,000 deaths each year.

Finding meat without antibiotics is difficult. Of the 4.42 billion pounds of chicken bought in stores last year, just 5.9% was antibiotic-free, according to data from market research firm IRI.

Even that doesn't mean the animal never was fed antibiotics. Meat labeled "antibiotic-free" usually means only that there are no antibiotics currently in the meat, said Austin Wilson, the environmental health project manager for the advocacy group [As You Sow](#).

While there's a growing push to reduce the use of antibiotics, few call for an outright ban.

"Chickens and cattle can get sick, just like people can get sick, and of course you have to treat them," said Pew public health veterinarian Gail Hansen.

But giving the animals small doses of antibiotics to force growth and to prevent illness is problematic, according to Hansen. Small doses allow the good and bad bacteria in animals to adapt and become immune to antibiotics. Eating the meat over time, while perfectly OK, gives bacteria a chance to pass the immunity to other bacteria found in humans.

It's not that the bacteria itself is bad. Bacteria is everywhere, all the time, even inside the body, Hansen points out. But when people do get sick from an infection, the antibiotics they'd normally receive are becoming less effective.

On Tuesday, Tyson Foods Inc. became the latest meat supplier to announce plans to stop using necessary antibiotics in its poultry stock, though by 2017. Perdue Farms Inc., Chick-fil-A Inc. and McDonald's Corp. are all part of the trend to stop or reduce the use of antibiotics in their chicken.

According to the World Health Organization, without deterrent action, the world is headed for an era in which common infections can once again be life-threatening.

"We're never going to get to the point where we have zero antibiotics in animals used for food," Hansen said. "But we can at least get to a point where we're at 50/50. I think that's certainly doable in the next few years—whether that's five or 10, I don't know."