

Antibiotics in the Beef Cattle Industry

Why are antibiotics used in beef production?

Beef producers use antibiotics to ensure optimum health of their animals. In order to maintain animal health, antibiotics may be used to prevent the onset of disease, halt its progression or prevent the spread of illness after it occurs. Only healthy animals grow and reproduce well.

How does the Canadian government regulate the use of antibiotics in food animal production?

The Veterinary Drug Directorate, Health Canada, must approve all veterinary drugs before they can be sold in Canada. A drug is approved for use only if it:

- does not pose a risk to humans
- is safe for animals
- is an effective treatment
- follows strict manufacturing guidelines

Does the beef sold in Canada contain antibiotics?

Residues of antibiotics in beef are extremely rare. In fact, most recent results of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's (CFIA) residue testing program show 100% compliance.

If residue levels were detected, the meat or meat product would be prohibited from sale.

What is antibiotic resistance?

The purpose of antibiotics is to kill or reduce bacteria that may cause illness. The presence of an antibiotic creates an environment where those bacteria with the genetic characteristic of being unaffected by this specific antibiotic can flourish. In time, the number of unaffected bacteria (resistant) vs. susceptible bacteria in the population may change to the degree that the antibiotic is no longer effective.

Although the use and misuse of antibiotics in human medicine is recognized as being the major contributor, the beef industry realizes the potential for the development of antibiotic resistance within the livestock industry. Veterinarians and farmers take measures to ensure that bacteria do not develop resistance as it is important that antibiotics remain effective. The beef cattle industry has taken a lead role in ensuring that sound science is the foundation for our understanding of the magnitude and impact of antibiotic resistance on humans and on farm animals.

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What would happen if animal antibiotics weren't used?

When used according to label instructions, animal antibiotics benefit both consumers and producers. By managing the disease within the animal, producers are able to control the spread of diseases and reduce the risk of illnesses that are difficult to treat. In addition, healthy animals grow more efficiently.

A study in the European Union found that, if animal antibiotics were eliminated, the cost of beef to consumers could increase by 34 percent, while cost to beef producers would be even higher.

What is the beef industry doing to prevent the spread of antibiotic resistance?

In 1994 representatives from government and industry developed a producer-driven, on-farm quality assurance program to ensure the production of safe, high-quality beef in an environmentally friendly manner. The program includes guidelines on the proper use of antibiotics.