

CHAIN REACTION V

How Top Restaurants Rate on Reducing Antibiotic Use in Their Beef Supplies



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Executive Summary

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and the increasingly hard-to-treat infections they cause, are a global health crisis, risking a future in which common illnesses could once again become life-threatening on a large scale. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) consider antibiotic-resistant bacteria a leading threat to global public health. Yet government agencies are failing to adequately address the problem with the urgency it demands. This past year, infectious disease experts published a new estimate indicating that more than 160,000 Americans die each year from antibiotic-resistant infections, making them collectively the fourth leading cause of death.¹

The overuse of antibiotics in livestock production significantly contributes to the rise and spread of antibiotic resistance.² When antibiotics are used routinely, some bacteria are able to withstand the drugs, survive and multiply, spreading resistant strains.³ These bacteria may share their resistance genes with other bacteria, even those that may not have been directly exposed to antibiotics in the first place.⁴ Nearly two-thirds of the medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. go to food animals.^{5,6} Many meat producers routinely give drugs to animals that are not sick to help them survive the stressful, unsanitary conditions on factory farms.⁷ Despite the threat posed to public health, the U.S. lacks effective laws and policies to prevent the overuse of antibiotics in agriculture.

Four previous editions of the Chain Reaction Antibiotics Scorecard documented the way in which the nation's top restaurant chains have committed

to source chicken produced without the routine use of antibiotics.⁸ These corporate actions helped transform antibiotic use practices in the U.S. chicken industry. This fifth edition of Chain Reaction finds that a majority of the top 25 chains are serving only chicken raised without the routine use of medically important antibiotics in their restaurants. We also see some new, albeit limited, improvements in antibiotic use policies for beef, and continued lack of progress in pork and turkey. Given that in 2017 cattle accounted for 42 percent of all medically important antibiotics sales to the U.S. livestock industry — more than any other category — this slow pace of change is especially troubling.⁹ (In contrast, five percent of medically important antibiotics sales went to the chicken industry in 2017.)

Fast food restaurants, as some of America's largest meat and poultry buyers, have played an instrumental role in pushing producers to use antibiotics responsibly, and should continue to leverage their buying power in support of better practices. McDonald's, for example, is the single largest purchaser of beef in the United States.¹⁰ To protect public health and push the beef industry to eliminate the overuse of antibiotics, restaurants — especially large burger chains — should commit to sourcing beef from producers that use antibiotics only to treat animals diagnosed with an illness or, in limited circumstances, to control a verified disease outbreak. In other words, chains should choose producers whose practices align with the global recommendations made by the WHO in 2017.¹¹


This year we see some positive shifts in beef antibiotic use policies among restaurant chains, but these are in the early stages of adoption for the most part.

Long-time leaders Chipotle and Panera once again earned grades in the “A” range for their approach to responsible antibiotic use in beef supplies. And in what could represent a major transition, this year iconic brands McDonald’s and Taco Bell set new commitments that earned them a “C” and “D” respectively.

- » In 2015, Subway committed to sourcing only beef raised without antibiotics for their U.S. restaurants. This year, Subway updated their global antibiotics policy to align with the WHO Guidelines. It remains to be seen how these two pledges will relate to implementation for their beef supplies, but the company’s promise to act earned it a “C” in this year’s beef scorecard.
- » Wendy’s says it currently sources 30 percent of its beef from producers that have cut the use of one medically important antibiotic - tylosin - by 20 percent. This small step earned Wendy’s a “D+” in this year’s beef scorecard.
- » The remaining 15 of the top restaurant chains surveyed that offer beef products, including such well known chains as Burger King, Arby’s and Sonic, received failing grades for lacking any public policy to source beef raised without the routine use of antibiotics (four companies in the top 25 do not serve beef).

While restaurants and major meat producers have critical roles to play in stopping the overuse of antibiotics, urgent government action is critical to achieve the kind of lasting, industry-wide overhaul needed to fully protect public health.

Policymakers should only allow beef producers to use medically important antibiotics under the guidance of a licensed veterinarian, and to treat animals diagnosed with an illness or to control a verified disease outbreak. Policymakers should also set national goals for reduction of antibiotic use in food animals, and dramatically improve collection and disclosure of antibiotic use data. While researchers, public health experts, and the public can glean industry-level information about how antibiotics are used with currently available data, the full picture of how, when, and for what reason antibiotics are used in the livestock sector, especially for beef (and pork), remains hidden from public view. Comprehensive policy reforms would ensure that all meat producers across the U.S. meet the same responsible antibiotic use standards. These reforms are vital to preserving life-saving medicines for the future health of both animals and people.

Chain Reaction V Beef Scorecard	
A	
A-	
B+	
B	
B-	
C+	
C	 
D+	
D	
F	              

SUPERLATIVES

“EARLY LEADERS”

Courageous, early leadership from companies such as **Chipotle and Panera** was critical to realizing the restaurant sector’s progress to date around more responsible antibiotic use. They proved from their early beginnings that a company can be a successful, thriving business while also supporting more sustainable meat and poultry production practices. Both companies earned grades in the “A” range since the first edition of the Chain Reaction scorecard in 2015.

“BEST BURGER JOINTS”

Shake Shack and BurgerFi earned high marks on the 2018 Burger Chain Scorecard for committing to only serve responsibly raised beef across all of their restaurants. The 2019 survey confirmed that these commitments have not waned. Although Shake Shack and BurgerFi were not included in this year’s official grades, it’s important to note their contributions to sourcing responsibly raised beef. These leaders of the fast-casual burger sector also posted higher year-over-year sales from 2017 to 2018, indicating that better beef can be a win for the bottom line as well as for public health.

“BIGGEST MOOOVER”

This year, we honor **McDonald’s** with the “Biggest Mooover Award,” given to the company that made the most impressive grade leap in beef, from 2018 (F) to 2019 (C). McDonald’s earned this award for its leadership on responsible antibiotic use in beef, stemming from the company’s December 2018 commitment to end the routine use of antibiotics for prevention purposes in most of its enormous global beef supply chain. The company plans to track antibiotic use in the production of beef sold in its restaurants and publicize reduction targets by the end of 2020.

“BIGGEST WANNA-BE”

This award goes to **Wendy’s**, which works hard to seem like a leader when it comes to strong antibiotic use policies in beef yet is not. For more than a year, Wendy’s has been publicizing what are only piecemeal changes in antibiotic use in its beef supplies. Wendy’s says that *for 30 percent of their beef, producers are cutting back on the use of just one medically important drug called tylosin and by only a mere 20 percent*. Wendy’s approach is inadequate for the following reasons:

1. It applies to just 30 percent of overall beef supplies, with no announced timeline for when Wendy’s will address the remaining 70 percent of its beef. A phased-in implementation process like Wendy’s seems to be using would be fine if the company committed to a firm completion timeline. But without this, consumers have no assurance that the company’s pledge will ever be adopted for all beef served in its restaurants.
2. Wendy’s has reduced the use of just one antibiotic, tylosin, in its beef supply chain. Tylosin is commonly used in beef cattle to address liver abscesses in cows, an entirely preventable health condition stemming from inappropriate high-grain diets common to feedlots. Given that tylosin, a macrolide antibiotic, is identified as a Highly Critically Important Antimicrobial by the WHO, this small reduction is problematic and doesn’t match the gravity or the urgency of the antibiotic resistance crisis.²⁶ The routine use of tylosin, as well as other medically important antibiotics, must be entirely phased out in order to ensure that these precious medicines are effective when they are needed the most.
3. The narrow focus on tylosin ignores the fact that the beef industry also uses other medically important drugs routinely and in high volume, particularly tetracyclines.

Since spring 2019, our groups have been calling on the company for a timebound commitment to end routine use of **all** medically important antibiotics across **all** of the beef sold in Wendy’s restaurants. U.S. PIRG published an op-ed in the *Columbus Dispatch*, the Wendy’s hometown paper, calling on the company to take further action on antibiotics. In the same outlet, Wendy’s responded with excuses.²⁷ In June 2019, 60 health, environmental, consumer, sustainable agriculture and food safety groups sent an open letter to Wendy’s CEO Todd Penegor echoing this call to action. Since then, staff from the Natural Resources Defense Council spoke directly to Mr. Penegor about the need for a strong beef antibiotics policy at the Wendy’s annual shareholder meeting.²⁸ Members of the *Antibiotics Off the Menu* coalition also delivered petitions signed by more than 125,000 people communicating the same message to Wendy’s franchises around the country in September.