



## FDA Curbs Use of Antibiotics in Animals

January 18, 2012, by *Patrick A. Malone*

Given our propensity to pop an antibiotic at the first sign of a sniffle—and much of the medical establishment's willingness to gratify this often unwise habit—it's hard to believe that the use of antibiotics to fight infection has been common practice for only a couple of generations.

Like all medications, they come with risks of side effects, but in the right circumstances, antibiotics are truly wonder drugs. They're so wonderful, however, that we overuse them. The problem then becomes not just one of risky and/or unpleasant side effects, but of reduced efficacy.

The more frequently antibiotics are used, the better bacteria become at resisting them. It's simple evolution—survival of the fittest bacteria. The fitter (stronger) the bacteria, the more compromised the antibiotics. In order to keep up with the demand of increasingly resistant bacteria, new compounds must constantly be developed. The old ones simply don't work anymore.

Antibiotic resistance occurs when humans ingest the drugs more frequently and for disorders they are not meant to address. But one contributor to this diminishing-effects scenario is not the direct result of human behavior—it results from the routine use of antibiotics in agriculture. They're given to livestock to prevent disease and promote growth. That practice has been called into question often in recent years.

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As explained in the [Los Angeles Times](#), last year, the American Medical Association (AMA), the World Health Organization (WHO) and other medical groups warned that “the misuse of antibiotics in food animal production may be creating a serious problem for human health by fostering development of drug-resistant bacteria.”

Further, some studies showed that taking antibiotics out of animal feed "made antibiotic-resistant bacteria less prevalent in both animals and people with no ill effects for animals or ranchers."

Earlier this month, the FDA put its foot down on some unapproved uses of antibiotics for livestock. The agency [prohibited use in certain animals](#) of one class of antibiotics called cephalosporins, and prohibited using the drugs for purposes other than their original intent (called “off-label” or “extra-label” use) except for animals that are rarely consumed by humans.

It wasn't the first time the FDA attempted to curb the use of antibiotics in animals. In 2008, the FDA made a move to limit off-label antibiotic use in livestock, but wussed out in the face of opposition by agricultural interests.

Congressional Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.) is a microbiologist who has written legislation addressing antibiotic overuse. In a statement about the latest action, she said, "We need to start acting with the swiftness and decisiveness this problem deserves. With over 1 million Salmonella cases in the U.S. each year, at least 30,000 Americans will contract cephalosporin-resistant bacteria every year. I'm glad the FDA is finally acting but how many Americans have needlessly been sickened in the meantime?"

The new rules take effect April 5, but as in 2008, there's a comment period in the interim. Comments received last time helped sway the FDA against enforcing the restrictions. So if you care about antibiotic resistance, you might want to weigh in about the latest proposal. Link [here](#) to read a Q&A about general antibiotic use in animals and specifically this action. To submit comments, link [here](#) and include the docket number FDA-2008-N-0326.

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