

The Truth Behind Hormones and Antibiotics on Pork Products

By: Renee Korczak Ph.D., RDN, CSSD, LD & Rachel Stark M.S, R.D.

Do you find yourself confused when you walk into the grocery store and try to interpret claims and labels on food products? It can be overwhelming if you don't know the meaning behind them. Packaged foods, for example, can carry nutrient content, structure function, or health claims. "Low sodium" and "Calcium helps build strong bones" are examples of nutrient content and structure function claims, to give you an example. These types of claims are all defined and regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and are beneficial in communicating key bits of information to a consumer (1).

However, there are a variety of claims that fall outside the scope of nutrient content, structure function, and health claims. Claims regarding how the food was processed, produced, or even raised, can be confusing to a consumer if they are not aware of the meaning behind it. Claims such as antibiotic-free, and hormone free are just two examples. To help clear up the confusion, read the information below on hormones and antibiotics to help you make better-informed decisions when purchasing pork products.

Hormones Defined

What are hormones? Hormones are considered a chemical messenger within the body. They are produced in the body and work in a variety of ways. They help organisms grow, reproduce, and maintain normal functions. Hormones are not only found in humans, but also naturally within plants and animals. Since they are naturally found within any organism, this means that no meat nor plant is ever 'hormone free' as some food products may claim.

No Hormones Added

What does it mean when food is labeled as 'no hormones added'? Hormones can be given to certain animals for reasons such as improving feed efficiency or growth rate (2). However, when it comes to pork, the simple and straight forward answer is that no hormones are ever added at any time. This claim should never be used on a label unless it is followed by, 'Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones' (3). This is done to prevent misleading consumers into thinking pork products are grown with additional hormones.

Antibiotics

Why are antibiotics used? Antibiotics are used to help treat, control, and prevent disease not only in humans, but also in animals. Farmers care about their animals and want to make sure they are cared for. For example, when a pig is sick and treated by a veterinarian with antibiotics, the farmer must follow the directions of the antibiotic. Each antibiotic has a specific drug - withdrawal time, meaning a certain number of days must pass between the last day of antibiotic treatment and the date the animal enters the food supply^{4,5}. This is done to ensure all antibiotics have left the animal's system. There are strict levels of testing done to ensure no traces are found in the animal when marketed. What this means is that you will never eat pork with antibiotics in it. There are a variety of labels found on food packages around antibiotics – ‘no antibiotics’ or ‘raised without antibiotics’ or ‘antibiotic free’.

No Antibiotics Ever or Raised without Antibiotics

‘No antibiotics ever’ or ‘raised without antibiotics’ means an animal has never received antibiotics in its lifetime. Some farms choose not to use antibiotics in prevention of disease or when an animal is sick. If an animal were to get sick and be treated with antibiotics, their meat would not fall within this category. When choosing a product that has this label, it does not tell you the living conditions in which the animal was raised, but that no antibiotics were ever given.

Antibiotic-free

Antibiotic-free means no antibiotics are in the animals' system when entering the food supply. This marketing label does not tell you that all animal products are antibiotic-free when placed on the shelf in the store. Farmers have strict regulations they must follow to ensure no animal leaves the farm with antibiotics in the system.

Conclusion

Claims on food products are meant to inform the consumer about a key attribute of the product, but some claims such as antibiotic-free or hormone-free can be confusing if you do not know the meaning behind those words. It is important to be informed about what current labeling practices mean and how they can impact you as the consumer.

References

1. Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. Label claims for food & dietary supplements. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-labeling-nutrition/label-claims-food-dietary-supplements>. Accessed August 25, 2021.
2. Growth promoting hormones in beef production and marketing. UMN Extension. <https://extension.umn.edu/beef-news/growth-promoting-hormones-beef-production-and-marketing>. Published January 25, 2019. Accessed September 15, 2021.
3. Food safety and Inspection Service. Home | Food Safety and Inspection Service. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/>. Accessed August 25, 2021.
4. Antibiotics. Pork Checkoff. <https://porkcheckoff.org/pork-production-management/swine-health/antibiotics/>. Published March 9, 2021. Accessed September 15, 2021.
5. Antibiotic Residue vs Resistance. National Pork Board. <https://library.pork.org/media/?mediaId=0D5C90F1-75BA-4E4B-9F303BA2FE70BDCD>. Accessed September 11, 2021.