

Q&A: GROUND BEEF, HAMBURGER, AND PATTIES

How is ground beef made?

When beef carcasses are cut into steaks and roasts, some smaller pieces result, called “trimmings.” Trimmings are simply smaller pieces of various sizes. Trimmings have different lean content levels.

Trimmings are blended together in different rations to achieve a desired lean content, such as “80 percent lean/20 percent fat” or “93 percent lean/7 percent fat.” The blended trimmings are then ground to the desired texture. Many ground beef packages indicate the ratio of lean to fat in the product. All ground meat products are required to list the fat content on the nutrition labeling panel.

Ground beef also can be made by grinding a whole muscle such as a chuck roast, but trimmings containing higher levels of fat typically need to be blended in to create a product that has the characteristics of what we commonly consider ground beef. The fat content can only be adjusted by adding higher level fat trimmings, never by adding in pure beef fat. Ground beef cannot contain more than 30 percent fat.

What is hamburger?

Hamburger is a commonly used term for one of America’s favorite foods and is one of the most common menu items in America. Its menu identity involves a grilled or broiled beef burger on a bun, typically with lettuce, tomato and other toppings.

But the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a specific definition or “standard of identity” for the raw beef product in the grocery store labeled “hamburger.” As in ground beef production, making hamburger also involves grinding trimmings, but when making hamburger, pure beef fat may be added, with a maximum of 30 percent fat allowed.

Can anything be added to hamburger or ground beef?

Although both hamburger and ground beef can have seasonings added, no water, phosphates, extenders, or binders may be added. The label will indicate when seasonings are added.

What are patties?

Patties are ground beef products that are shaped into the iconic circular shape that we think of as “a burger.”

Some patties are 100 percent ground beef and other patties may be 100 percent hamburger.

“Beef patties” may also contain additional ingredients. All patties must include ingredients on the label. Common ingredients may include binders and extenders, such as soy or oat protein, that help patties hold their shape and enhance the eating experience. Adding binders and extenders is comparable to adding oatmeal or bread crumbs when making meatloaf or handmade patties. Some patties may have a particular seasoning or flavor such as chipotle, mushrooms, or cheese.

In addition, the regulations permit beef byproducts in patties if included in the ingredient statement and are part of the product name. If beef hearts were added, for example, the product name would be “Beef Patties with Beef Hearts.” Like many other variety meat cuts, beef hearts are wholesome and nutritious, but they are not commonly consumed by the majority of Americans and for that reason, are not commonly added to beef patties.

What are pre-cooked patties?

Some patties are cooked by the manufacturer and re-heated by the consumer. This process is a convenient option, particularly for institutional food-service, vending machines and for those enjoying a picnic or campout, where cooking and handling options may be limited.

Helpful Links:

U.S. Department of Agriculture

www.usda.gov

USDS Meat & Poultry Hotline

1-888-MPHotline

Mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov