

Antibiotics in Livestock and Poultry Production

The words you choose and the numbers you use matter.

Antibiotic use and antibiotic resistance in humans and animals are some of the most complex topics that reporters are asked to cover. Certain statistics and phrases are commonly used in reporting and in online sources, and they appear to become an accepted part of the American lexicon. But being mindful of key words and statistics can help reporters improve the accuracy of their coverage and the information that is passed on to readers and viewers. We've compiled ten tips to improve accuracy.

#1: Antibiotics sometimes used in livestock production – but never in meat production.

Antibiotics are sometimes used to ensure livestock and poultry health. Media stories sometimes say “Antibiotics in meat” or “antibiotics in meat production.” Antibiotics are not used to produce meat. They are used, at times, to ensure the livestock and poultry health, just as they are sometimes used to care for our pets.

#2: Don't Sing the '80 percent' Song.

An often cited and deliberately ‘shocking’ statistic says that 80 percent of antibiotics are used in livestock and poultry production, but experts warn against the use of this number for several reasons.

Sales of veterinary antibiotics are tracked, sales of human antibiotics are not. The “80 percent” number uses actual veterinary drug sales data but only uses estimated and projected human antibiotic drug sales data. The vast majority of antibiotics are given either to animals or to people. Very few antibiotics are used in both people and animals.

#3: Cattle and Pigs Weigh More Than People.

If you choose to accept the “80-percent-of-antibiotics-are-used-in-livestock-production” statistic, remember this: Antibiotics are administered based upon weight.

Animals are more numerous and heavier. It takes more antibiotics to treat a lung infection in a 1,400 pound steer than in a 140 pound human.

#4: Don't Confuse the 'R' Words: Resistance and Residues.

The words “resistance” and “residues” are sometimes used interchangeably. The real concern about antibiotic use in humans and in livestock is the potential for bacteria exposed to too many antibiotics to develop resistance to those antibiotics. The real concern among experts is not that humans could be exposed to antibiotics through the meat they eat and somehow develop a ‘tolerance’ to that antibiotic. (See below.) Rather, the concern is that overexposing bacteria to antibiotics could make them antibiotic resistant. If a human contracts an infection from a germ with

significant resistance, it may be more challenging to treat.

#5: Residues Are Rare, Not ‘Commonly Found.’

Under the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) rules, farmers and ranchers must wait a defined period to send animals to market if they have been given antibiotics. In meat and poultry plants, USDA inspectors sample carcasses and organs to ensure no residue violations are found – and they almost never are.

An April 8, 2014, *Washington Post* story reported, “The USDA randomly tests carcasses for residues of pesticides, contaminants and veterinary drugs including antibiotics. In [2011](#), it screened for 128 chemicals, and 99 percent of the tested carcasses were free of all of them.”

#6: Big Difference: ‘Livestock Raised Without Antibiotics’ vs. ‘Antibiotic Free Meat.’

The phrase “Livestock raised without antibiotics” is not interchangeable with “antibiotic free meat.” Livestock (and poultry) can be raised with or without antibiotics. Labels on these products must reflect that. USDA will not permit meat and poultry to be labeled “antibiotic free” because it’s a misleading way to characterize how antibiotics are used.

#7: Overuse In Humans Is the Biggest Issue, according to CDC.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2013 report *Antibiotic Resistant Threats in the United States 2013* said that the number one contributing factor to the development of antimicrobial resistance is overuse in humans, though CDC emphasized the need for good antibiotic stewardship among livestock and poultry farmers as well. In a 2013 press conference, CDC’s Director Michael Frieden, M.D., said, “The most acute problem is in hospitals. And the most resistant organisms in hospitals are emerging in those settings, because of poor antimicrobial stewardship among humans.” CDC said half of antibiotic prescriptions written to people are unnecessary.

#9: Beware The Use of the ‘Superbugs’ Moniker.

While a bacteria may be naturally resistant to an antibiotic or may have acquired resistance, that doesn’t

make it a ‘superbug.’ FDA’s Center for Veterinary Medicine said it best in a letter to the *New York Times*: “It is an oversimplification to conclude that resistance in any bacterium is problematic for human health. Some bacteria are naturally resistant to certain drugs...Describing certain bacteria that are resistant to one, or even a few, drugs as ‘superbugs’ is inappropriate. Rather, ‘superbugs’ are pathogens that can cause severe disease and are very difficult to treat.”

#9: Hormones and Antibiotics Are Not the Same.

Often ‘hormones and antibiotics’ are referenced together in a single phrase, as if they are one and the same. They are not. Antibiotics are used to ensure health and treat illness; supplemental hormones are used to improve an animal’s ability to convert feed to muscle, which becomes meat. Antibiotics are used in all species. Supplemental hormones are only permitted in cattle production. The use of antibiotics for growth promotion is being discontinued. (See #10)

#10: Farmers Say ‘Goodbye Growth Promoting Antibiotics.’

Humans seek medical care when needed and sometimes that involves antibiotics. The same goes for livestock and poultry where farmers and veterinarians collaborate on their behalf. While antibiotics can, in some cases, help animals convert feed to muscle more easily, the use of antibiotics for this purpose is being discontinued at the recommendation of the FDA.

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