



*Food Safety
HACCP*

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MESSAGE:

The Secretary wanted
to make sure you
saw this

Success for New Federal Standards

NY Times 10/14/98 DS

THE Federal Government's new system for reducing contamination in meat and poultry appears to be having positive results. Two weeks ago, the Agriculture Department announced that the system has almost cut in half the number of broiler chickens contaminated with salmonella in the plants where it is in use. It has also greatly reduced the amount of salmonella-infected pork.

The system, called Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points, and also known as Haacp (pronounced HASS-ip), became mandatory in January at the largest meat and poultry processing plants (like Perdue's and Tyson's). By the year 2000, the standards will include smaller plants as well. Under Haacp, plants must identify critical points in the production process where contamination is likely to occur and implement plans to prevent the contamination. The system, with its routine testing for various bacteria, marks the first time the Federal Government has set microbial standards and required industry and Government testing on such a large scale.

It is a definite step up from the old sniff-and-poke method.

There are many ways for producers to reduce the levels of contamination to meet the system's standards. Scientific study has increased in the wake of highly publicized

New technology pits 'good' bacteria against harmful bacteria.

outbreaks of food-borne illness as well as huge and costly recalls of tainted food, especially ground beef.

Critics charge that the meat and poultry industries resisted change. It was easier — and cheaper — to tell consumers it was their fault if they got sick from eating tainted beef or chicken because they had mishandled it. The industry realized that sales of its products were affected by these incidents. More or less.

Some of the ideas for safer food are so simple you wonder why no one ever thought of them before. More humane handling of cattle, for example, reduces stress and thereby reduces shedding of deadly *E. coli* 0157:H7. When the cattle are stressed, the *E. coli* are released from their intestinal tract and are excreted in their manure. And just last month, scientists at Cornell University discovered that if cattle were switched from a diet of grain to a diet of hay or fresh grass

for five days before slaughter, *E. coli* 0157:H7 is virtually eliminated.

No one is suggesting that any of the new technologies will completely eliminate the hazards associated with eating raw or minimally processed foods. And in fact, recalls of contaminated food do not appear to have fallen. Late last month, about two million pounds of meat and poultry headed for institutional use were recalled because of salmonella contamination at a Georgia processing plant.

But the new ideas can reduce the level of risk. Some of them, like inoculating animals with "good" bacteria to crowd out the dangerous bacteria, have already won Federal approval; others are still in the development stage.

Some of New York City's best-known chickens are already participating in a technology called competitive exclusion. One-quarter of Bell & Evans chickens are being sprayed with Preempt, a mixture of friendly bacteria that prevent harmful bacteria like salmonella from ever taking hold. The spray, produced by MS Bioscience Inc. in Madison, Wis., has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration. The president of Bell & Evans, Scott Sechler, says that eventually, all the company's chickens will be treated with Preempt.

The president of MS Bioscience, Dr. John

on Meat and Poultry

It helps to pinpoint the weak spots of production plants.

DeLoach, says the chickens are sprayed in the hatchery and within two days they have a lifetime protection against salmonella.

But the spray is only part of the MS Bioscience regimen: there must also be clean litter for the chickens, and neither antibiotics nor growth promoters can be used. Mr. DeLoach admits he is not sure what part is responsible for the success.

Mr. Sechler said: "We are very happy with the results so far. For the most part we found completely negative tests with a very small amount of positives. The percentages amazed us."

Possible future treatments include the work of Dr. Michael Doyle, who is the director of the Center for Food Safety and Quality Enhancement at the University of Georgia. Dr. Doyle is experimenting with another form of competitive exclusion, giving young calves an oral dose of friendly *E. coli* bacteria to prevent the growth of *E. coli* 0157:H7.

But sufficient tests for F.D.A. approval are at least two years away, Dr. Doyle said.

Scientists have been working on the egg front as well. Pasteurized Eggs L.P. of Laconia, N.H., has patented a technique for pasteurizing eggs in their shells. The eggs would carry an Agriculture Department shield that certifies them as pasteurized and 99.999 percent salmonella free. The company says that the pasteurized eggs will retain their characteristic taste, appearance and cooking characteristics. Welcome back sunny side up and real Caesar salad.

Shady Brook Farms has been using trisodium phosphate, an anti-bacterial rinse, on its turkey carcasses for several years, and according to the company it virtually eliminates such disease causing bacteria as *E. coli* 0157:H7, salmonella and listeria.

But elimination of all bacteria from food is neither feasible nor desirable. There is such a thing as "too pristine," James Jay, a microbiologist at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, said. Getting rid of all bacteria on a carcass leaves the meat with no protection if it is recontaminated, he added.

No matter what improvements are made to reduce the levels of harmful bacteria in the food supply, everyone still needs to be careful at home and follow the recommendations for safe handling.

EATING WELL
Marian Burros