

THE AMERICAN VEAL INDUSTRY:

Safety through Science

While veal calves are housed in sanitary conditions, they are still exposed to pathogens and are susceptible to the threat of contagious diseases. For this reason, veal farmers work with their veterinarians to use animal health care products properly to help minimize the spread of disease and treat sick calves.

Keeping Calves Healthy

On today's modern veal farms, farmers may use antibiotics at two different levels: 1) subtherapeutic, or very low amounts, added to the feed to fight off pathogens in the first 28 days of a calf's life; and 2) therapeutic, or higher levels, given to an individual animal if it becomes ill. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates the use of antibiotics and specifies the role of veterinarians in recommending and prescribing disease prevention and treatment programs. As a further safeguard, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for inspecting veal calves both before and during processing.

In addition to sound animal husbandry practices, veal farmers may use antibiotics to prevent and treat disease and its spread among the livestock. They do not use these drugs arbitrarily, continuously, or typically in large doses.

In the early weeks of life, when the animal is very young and may have an immature immune system, veal calves may receive subtherapeutic doses of antibiotics as a disease prevention tool. This use of low levels of antibiotics is endorsed both by the FDA and veterinarians because it helps control outbreaks of disease that would otherwise increase the morbidity and mortality of the animals. The success of this type of therapy is much the same as with antibiotic use in humans — therapeutic administration of these drugs is prescribed in response to clinical symptoms of illness.

A Public-Private Partnership

Before any animal drug is approved for use, the drug manufacturer must prove to the FDA that it is safe for both animals and humans.

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Drug manufacturers must extensively test animal health care products to demonstrate their safety and effectiveness prior to receiving FDA approval.

For each animal drug that the FDA approves, the agency spells out the permitted dosage, its purpose for use, and its specific usage for the animal species being treated. In addition, FDA regulates the labeling of these products and determines if they should be sold over the counter or restricted to veterinary prescription. FDA requires additional studies designed to help the agency set "tolerance levels," or the very minuscule amounts of the drug that can remain in the animal tissue at the time of slaughter. It is the job of the Food Safety and Inspection Services (FSIS) within USDA to monitor the meat supply to ensure compliance with the tolerance levels set by FDA.

The Role of the Food Safety and Inspection Service

The FSIS is responsible for meat inspection and for carrying out the National Residue Program, which is designed to detect residues in meat. Every calf marketed is visually inspected by a trained and licensed USDA veterinarian and/or USDA inspector before and after the slaughtering process to detect any physical problems with the animal.

In a typical veal processing plant, each calf that comes through is inspected before processing to detect symptoms of illness. After processing, the carcass and organs of the calf are also examined for any signs of disease and other food safety concerns. If any of these tests show violation for residue, the meat is discarded — it never reaches the food supply.

FSIS carries out its responsibility through two kinds of testing programs. The first, called "monitoring," involves taking tissue samples from a statistically based random sample of calves coming through the plant. The other method, called "surveillance," is based upon a suspicion that a residue problem exists in some portion of the calves. Factors that lead to surveillance include visual inspections of the animals that indicate potential prob-

lems or previous problems at a certain plant.

According to the 1994 results of the FSIS's National Residue Program, the USDA reported a very low rate of violative residues in veal. Of all veal calves tested in the residue monitoring program, only .075 percent (less than 1 carcass per 1,000) had antibiotic residue levels that exceeded the conservative limits established by the FDA.

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