

Newspaper: Beef Industry Using Risky Procedures

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — The U.S. beef industry has been using practices that could put people's health at risk, including a mechanical meat tenderizing process that may increase the risk of E. coli exposure, according to a newspaper report.

[The Kansas City Star](#) [1] said in a series of articles that ended Tuesday that it spent a year investigating various aspects of the U.S. beef industry, looking at the largest beef packers, including Tyson Foods of Arkansas, Cargill Meat Solutions of Wichita, National Beef of Kansas City and JBS USA Beef of Greeley, Colo. The newspaper also investigated feedlots, processing plants, animal drug companies and lobbyists for the industry.

The tenderizing method, which results in so-called bladed or needled beef, has been around for decades and involves injecting marinades into meat. The industry says the practice is safe, but food safety advocates said it can drive E. coli and other pathogens deeper into the meat, requiring more cooking to destroy them.

Although it's not clear how widely used the tenderizing process is, a U.S. Department of Agriculture survey from 2008 showed that more than 90 percent of beef producers use the method on some cuts. Mechanically tenderized meat usually isn't labeled, the Star reported.

Tim Klein, CEO of Kansas City-based National Beef said that, "If it is good meat, you don't have to do something like that to tenderize it." A company spokesman later acknowledged, however, that it does blade some steaks for customers who request them.

Officials with the American Meat Institute, an industry lobbying group, defended the tenderizing process as safe and cited a 2008 USDA study that said the risk of illness from an E. coli strain in those products "is not significantly higher." Beef industry officials also pointed out that E. coli illnesses have dropped considerably in recent years.

"A miracle has occurred in the beef industry," said Janet Riley, senior vice president for public affairs at the American Meat Institute. "Beef is safer, more affordable and more plentiful than it ever has been."

A study published last year in the *Journal of Food Protection*, however, found that bladed and marinated steaks were two to four times riskier than those that hadn't been tenderized mechanically.

James Marsden, a food safety professor at Kansas State University, said while the industry is improving, it could do a better job with mechanically tenderized steaks.

"E. coli is impossible to eradicate from beef cattle," he said. But a key to eliminating

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it in mechanically tenderized steaks is to use "interventions," such as spraying lactic acid on the meat to reduce or eliminate surface contamination. Some companies do that, he said, but the USDA does not require it.

The newspaper investigation also delved into the use of antibiotics in the beef industry and cited a recent report about two patients at Children's Mercy Hospital who suffered from fungal and other infections after contaminated debris was blown into their wounds in the deadly tornado that hit Joplin in May 2011. The patients were subjects of an article by Children's Mercy doctors and others published in The Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal in June.

According to the Pediatric Journal article, the antibiotic-resistant bacteria found in both patients were linked to "agricultural antibiotic use, release of heavy metals, organic pollutants and spillage of fecal and pathogenic microorganisms."

"What's different about our patients is that they were impaled with foreign bodies, similar to what has been reported in tsunami victims," said Mary Anne Jackson, chief of the infectious pediatrics disease division at Children's Mercy who contributed to the Journal article. "We were pulling gravel and dirt and other foreign material from their wounds weeks after their injuries."

She said doctors' efforts also were hampered by antibiotic-resistant infections.

Jackson said the most compelling explanation for that, given the kinds of infections found and the level of livestock production in that area, is that the use of antibiotics may have led to soil contamination with antibiotic resistant bacteria. Some of the world's largest cattle feedlots are a few hundred miles west of Joplin, and the city is home to one of the nation's largest cattle auction centers.

The Animal Health Institute said that conclusion was speculation.

"The article states that the infections were caused by a soil fungus," Animal Health Institute officials said after reviewing it. They went on to say that, "The antifungal medicines used for the patients' treatment are not approved for use in beef cattle production. ... In this instance, the speculation about food animal sources is quickly discarded once data driven analysis is applied."

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