Mechanically Tenderized Beef Labels Take Effect Next Month in Canada

Rob Drinkwater, The Canadian Press

EDMONTON — Canadian shoppers will be able to see next month if the beef they're buying has been mechanically tenderized.

Labelling regulations to take effect Aug. 21 are designed to protect consumers after the largest meat recall in the country's history two years ago.

Health Canada says beef that has been mechanically tenderized must have a sticker saying that.

Packaged steaks must also have cooking instructions that the meat must reach an internal temperature of 63 C and must be turned at least twice.

Health Canada says the rules are meant to ensure that tenderized meat is labelled from the processor to the consumer, since it's hard to tell just by looking at it.

But Bruce Cran, president of the Consumers' Association of Canada, said the cooking requirements are too complicated for most people and he wants mechanical tenderizing banned outright.

"What average Canadian having a beer and a steak is going to measure the temperature of the meat?" Cran asked.

"This process has the potential to seriously sicken people or cause fatalities."

Mechanical tenderizing is a process for tougher cuts of meat where needles or blades are used to penetrate or pierce the surface, or to inject the meat with a marinade or tenderizing solution.

While it makes the meat more tender, it can also inject E. coli bacteria that may be on the surface of the meat into the centre. That makes the bacteria harder to kill when cooking, particularly if a steak is done rare.

Federal officials began looking at issues surrounding mechanically tenderized meat after a massive E.-coli-related beef recall from Alberta's XL Foods in 2012.

The plant was shut down for about a month when E. coli was found in processed beef. Eighteen people fell ill after eating meat linked to the plant.

Cran says irradiation of all meats is the best way to ensure meat is safe.

Health Canada received an application to irradiate ground beef, poultry, shrimp and

prawns a decade ago, but a spokesman says the public was worried about the process.

Another application from the industry is under consideration.

Mark Klassen, director of technical services with the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, supports irradiation but says mechanically tenderized beef is safe as long as it's cooked properly.

"We've had very few cases of illness, even though mechanically tenderized beef has been in Canada in large quantities for a long time," Klassen said.

"It's had a very good safety record."

Klassen said the association was involved in the research that supported the new labelling, including the cooking instructions. He says it also tested the labels with a sample of Canadians to make sure they were understandable and practical.

He said the research determined that earlier Health Canada instructions to bring the meat to the same internal temperature as ground beef, 71 C, made the beef tougher. He said 63 C is safe as long as the meat is turned at least twice.

The extra turning is necessary, he explained, to ensure that outer area of a steak is cooked. The testing determined that sometimes the internal temperature can be OK but the outside can still be undercooked.

"We've been able to achieve our food safety objectives and we've been able to achieve a more consistent temperature, which contributes to a better eating quality as well," Klassen said.

Keith Warriner, a food science professor at the University of Guelph, said labelling is good as long as the message is simple.

"Labels alone aren't enough to change people's attitudes and behaviours," Warriner said, noting an education campaign might be needed.

The labels will appear in supermarket meat coolers at a point in the summer when barbecue season has already been sizzling for some time.

George Fleming, sales supervisor at Barbecue Country in Edmonton, said customers aren't usually talking about mechanical tenderizing when shopping for grills.

But he said he usually tells them to go to a butcher shop for the best cuts.

"You pay a little more but you know the meat hasn't been tenderized."

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