

Study: Animal care, antibiotic facts improve consumer confidence (1/23/2010) **Cliff Gauldin**

- Knowledge of animal, meat safeguards improves consumer confidence.
- Vets score highly as sources consumers trust.
- Air emissions data for EPA report completed.

NEW research provides insight into how consumers feel about pork products and how hogs are raised.

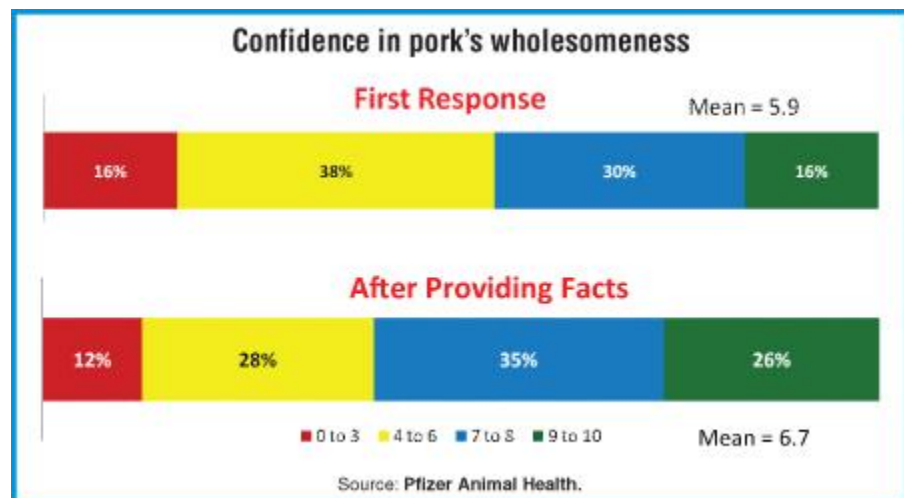
The results identified messages that can help consumers understand how food is raised and reassure them about the safety and wholesomeness of pork and other food products.

"We felt this research was important to better understand what consumers really think about therapeutic medicine use in swine, beef and dairy production," said Dr. Steve Sornsen, director of U.S. swine veterinary operations at Pfizer Animal Health. "Equally important, we wanted to see if exposure to accurate information about the safeguards that are currently in place helped make consumers more comfortable about animal agriculture."

Pfizer's survey confirmed that most consumers do not have a good understanding of how livestock are raised, especially as it pertains to managing sick and at-risk animals.

"More than 40% admit right off the bat that they don't have a clue as to how pigs are raised, and if they are given no information at all, just under half will say they see pork as wholesome. The numbers are only slightly higher for safety," said Sornsen.

However, as shown in the Figure, consumer assessments improved significantly after their exposure to a narrative focusing on four basic points of information: (1) veterinarians are involved in animal care, (2) the Food & Drug Administration approves the medicines used if animals get sick, (3) animals that receive antibiotics are not allowed to enter the food supply until after a withholding period to ensure that the medicine has sufficiently cleared their system and (4) government agencies require the testing of meat and milk to ensure the absence of residues.



After reading the narrative, for example, high confidence ratings on pork's wholesomeness and safety increased 63%.

Other changes in perceptions noted in the research include:

* When first asked, more than 40% felt animals that had received antibiotics should not be allowed into

the food supply. After more information was provided, 70-75% agreed that "sick animals should be treated with antibiotics if all the practices mentioned in the description are followed."

* Approximately half of the respondents initially expressed concern about risks associated with antibiotics given to farm animals that might end up in their food. After receiving more information, more than two-thirds felt "the practices described seem adequate in ensuring that animal products are safe for me and my family."

* Approximately half were either "unsure" or did not believe farm animals are under the care or oversight of a veterinarian. After the narrative, this fact was deemed important in improving confidence in two-thirds of respondents.

The research shows that consumers have little knowledge of FDA regulation of antibiotics or of government monitoring to help ensure that unsafe levels of antibiotics are not present in meat and milk. The facts also were highly rated as confidence builders regarding the safety of these products.

Consumers favorably viewed the concept of third-party auditing or verification systems to ensure that the practices described in the narrative are followed. Almost half said they would be "more comfortable" having such systems in place.

The research shows that most people don't want to think about issues such as antibiotic use in livestock, according to Sornsen, but if issues are brought to their attention, they want accurate information from sources they trust, and the Pfizer research offers a roadmap for providing the appropriate information.

"The good news is that current practices -- like adhering to withdrawal times, having a veterinarian involved in medicine use decisions and the government's role -- increase consumer confidence. They just don't know that these safeguards exist," said Sornsen.

"Since veterinarians scored very highly as sources consumers trust, then we hope that this research will inspire producers, veterinarians and their associations to work together to speak out more uniformly on these issues to fill that information void."

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