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Contact: Toby Fallsgraff, 202-478-6184-w,
202-374-9769-c, tfallsgraff@mrss.com

New USDA Study Confirms Potential for Human Health Effects from Non-Therapeutic Antibiotic Use in Poultry

Study Finds Common Food Poisoning Bacteria Found on Broiler Carcasses Routinely Fed Antibiotics Are Resistant to Human Drug

Washington, DC - A new study published in the June 1 issue of *Poultry Science* showed that *all* of the *Campylobacter* bacteria isolated from the carcasses of broiler chickens that had been routinely fed doses of tylosin to promote growth were resistant to the nearly chemically identical human drug erythromycin. The study by researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also showed that *none* of *Campylobacter* on birds fed a diet without tylosin carried these same resistance traits.

"Erythromycin is increasingly important for treatment of food poisoning in humans and as an alternative to penicillin in people who have penicillin allergies," said Margaret Mellon, Ph.D., director of the Food and Environment Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "This new study strengthens the already strong evidence that the use of non-therapeutic antibiotics in poultry and livestock leads to resistance to identical and similar drugs important in human medicine."

The study also suggests that broiler carcasses may carry a lower level of *Campylobacter* as a result of the tylosin treatment. Samples drawn at one of three stages of processing showed reduced levels, while the samples at the other two stages did not.

But according to David Wallinga, M.D., director of the Food and Health Program at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, "reductions in overall *Campylobacter* levels, even if confirmed by further studies, would be not be worth much if the residual bugs are all resistant to antibiotics."

Campylobacter causes more than 2 million illnesses each year in the United States. Resistant *Campylobacter*, which commonly contaminates retail poultry products, leads to human infections caused by bacteria that are more virulent and costly to treat than are their antibiotic-susceptible counterparts. Tylosin is one of the most common antibiotics routinely fed to poultry for growth promotion.

Preserving the effectiveness of erythromycin as treatment for serious food borne illness is increasingly important because resistance has eroded the effectiveness of other frontline drugs, like Cipro. In 2005, the FDA banned the use of a Cipro-like antibiotic, Baytril, in poultry flocks because its therapeutic use in chickens had led to a rise in Cipro-resistant *Campylobacter* infections in people.

Reference: Berrang et al. 2007. Subtherapeutic Tylosin Phosphate in Broiler feed Affects *Campylobacter* on Carcasses During Processing. *Poultry Science* 86:1229-1233. Available at:
<http://ps.fass.org/cgi/content/abstract/86/6/122>