

CHAIN REACTION IV:

BURGER EDITION



How Top Restaurants Rate on Reducing
Antibiotic Use in Their Meat Supply Chains

OCTOBER 2018

Executive Summary



The growth and spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria is a global health crisis, threatening to create a future in which common infections could once again become life-threatening on a large scale. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) consider antibiotic-resistant bacteria among the top threats to global public health, and the CDC estimates that each year, at least 23,000 Americans die from resistant infections.¹

The overuse of antibiotics in livestock production significantly contributes to the spread of antibiotic resistance.² The more antibiotics are used, the more bacteria become immune to them. More than 70 percent of the medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. go to food animals.^{3,4} Many meat producers routinely give the drugs to animals that are not sick either to promote faster growth or to prevent disease caused by factory farm production practices.⁵ Despite the threat posed to public health, the U.S. lacks effective laws and policies to prevent the overuse of antibiotics in agriculture.

Fast food restaurants, as some of America's largest meat buyers, can play an instrumental role in pushing meat producers to use antibiotics responsibly. In fact, previous editions of *Chain Reaction* have documented how the nation's top restaurant chains have stepped up their commitments to source chicken from producers that raise animals without the routine use of antibiotics.⁶ These corporate actions have helped move the chicken industry toward more responsible antibiotic use practices.

Consumers continue to want restaurants to serve meat raised without the routine use of antibiotics. For instance, in a nationally representative 2018 survey of 1,014 adults conducted by Consumer Reports, 59 percent of those polled indicated that they'd be more likely to eat at a restaurant that served meat raised without antibiotics – and more than half agreed that restaurants should stop serving meat and poultry raised with antibiotics.⁷

Although there is some progress in the chicken industry in response to such consumer demand, many fast food restaurants have failed to make meaningful commitments to address antibiotic overuse in their beef supply chains. This is concerning because in 2016, the beef sector accounted for 43 percent of the medically important antibiotics sold to the meat industry – more than any other meat category.⁸ By contrast, six percent of medically important antibiotics sales went to the chicken industry.

This year's *Chain Reaction* report and scorecard therefore focuses on antibiotic use policies and practices for beef sold in the top 25 U.S. burger chains. Though not our primary focus, *Chain Reaction* authors also surveyed and reported on progress related to antibiotic use across all meat and poultry supply chains of the nation's top 25 fast food and fast casual restaurants (some companies overlap between the two scorecards).

Burger chains have a crucial role to play in reducing antibiotic use. McDonald's, for example, is the single largest purchaser of beef in the United States.⁹ To protect public health and push the beef industry to eliminate the overuse of antibiotics, restaurants — especially burger chains — should commit to sourcing beef from producers that use antibiotics under the guidance of a licensed veterinarian, and only to treat animals diagnosed with an illness or, in limited circumstances, to control a verified disease outbreak. So far, however, few have done so.

Our survey shows that only two chains, Shake Shack and BurgerFi, source beef raised without the routine use of antibiotics. Most other chains have no public antibiotic use policy.

Two smaller burger chains, BurgerFi and Shake Shack, earned the only “A” grades for sourcing beef raised without any antibiotics. Both chains are rapidly expanding, with Shake Shack among the nation’s fastest growing restaurant chains.

Wendy’s currently sources 15 percent of its beef from producers that have cut the use of one medically important antibiotic – tylosin – by 20 percent. This modest step earned Wendy’s a “D-” in this scorecard.

Aside from these three, the other 22 burger chains surveyed received failing grades for lacking any announced policy to source beef raised without the routine use of antibiotics.

While restaurants and major meat producers have critical roles to play in stopping the overuse of antibiotics, the government must also act to achieve the kind of lasting, industry-wide change needed to fully protect public health.

Policymakers should only allow beef producers to use medically important antibiotics under the guidance of a licensed veterinarian, and to treat animals diagnosed with an illness or to control a verified disease outbreak. Policymakers should also set national goals for reduction of antibiotic use in food animals, and dramatically improve collection and disclosure of antibiotic use data. Comprehensive policy reforms will ensure that all meat producers across the U.S. meet the same responsible antibiotic use standards. These reforms are vital to preserving life-saving medicines for the future health of both animals and people.

Chain Reaction IV Burger Chain Scorecard	
A	SHAKE SHACK  SHACK 
A-	
B+	
B	
B-	
C+	
C	
D	
D-	
F	                     