Cooked ham with 39-day shelf life possible

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An Irish scientist said cooked ham might soon be given a 39-day shelf life by preserving it with a bacterium.

"Many dairy products such as cheeses and yogurts and some fermented meat products already use lactic acid producing bacteria to protect and preserve their products and we know these are acceptable to consumers in terms of taste," said Roisin Lagan of Northern Ireland's College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise. "We investigated the possibility of extending the shelf life of cooked and sliced ham by treating it with a protective culture of Lactobacillus sakei, a common lactic acid producing bacterium."

The researchers found the commercially cured and then Lactobacillus-treated meat not only had a longer shelf life, it was rated by an untrained panel of consumers as tastier, with a better texture and overall more acceptability, than conventionally treated ham.

"This means that we have found a reliable and cost effective way of developing a tasty ham product with a maximum shelf life of 39 days when stored at 4 C (39.2 degrees Fahrenheit)," said Lagan.

The research was presented Tuesday during a meeting of the Society for General Microbiology at the University of Edinburgh.