

Research shows 'raised without antibiotics' label claim in beef cattle lacks integrity

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How confident can shoppers be that they are getting beef products from cattle that have been raised without antibiotics? Not very, according to a new study published today in *Science*. Credit: GW

Many consumers choose higher-priced steaks, burgers and other beef

products from cattle that have been raised without antibiotics. The USDA approves meat labels with claims such as 'No Antibiotics Ever', 'No Added Antibiotics' and 'Raised without Antibiotics', but how confident can shoppers be that they are, in fact, getting what they paid for

Not very, according to a new study published today in *Science* that found that a substantial portion of cattle destined for the 'Raised without Antibiotics' market have been given antibiotics.

Lance B. Price, founder and co-director of the Antibiotic Resistance Action Center at the George Washington University, Laura Rogers, Deputy Director Antibiotic Resistance Action Center at GW, and Kevin Lo, CEO of Food In-Depth authored the study.

The team obtained [urine samples](#) from [beef cattle](#) being slaughtered for the 'Raised without Antibiotics' marketplace. They tested nearly 700 cattle from 312 lots and 33 different 'Raised without Antibiotics' certified feedyards. They found that 42 percent of feedyards had at least one animal test positive. Lots with at least one positive test represented approximately 15 percent of the 'Raised without Antibiotics' cattle processed during the study period.

The findings suggest that today's 'Raised without Antibiotics' labels lack integrity. "People ask me all the time what they can do to prevent the overuse of antibiotics in [meat production](#). For years, I've been telling them to buy products labeled 'Raised without Antibiotics'. I'm disappointed to see that these promises aren't always true," Price said. "The good news is that the majority of producers appear to be doing it right."

The research team found that there are strong incentives to cheat on a set of claims that are relatively easy to confirm. While USDA approval

gives these labels credibility and value in the marketplace, the agency does not mandate empirical testing to validate them. "The USDA, retailers and restaurants have the tools to ensure the integrity of these important labels. Consumers are paying real money for these claims, they should get what they pay for." Lo said.

'Raised without Antibiotics' production is a market-based solution to a serious public health issue, but the system only works if labels are verified. The authors recommend that the USDA and retailers strengthen verification and enforcement. "Growing demand for 'Raised without Antibiotics' meats and poultry has the potential to curb antibiotic use in food-animal production," Price said, "Until either the USDA acts to rigorously verify these claims or retailers eliminate their safe harbor of ignorance, consumers should not rely on the accuracy of these labels. My hope is that consumers and [advocacy groups](#) will pressure the USDA to reform these important [label](#) claims."

The study, "Policy reforms for antibiotic use claims in livestock," was published online April 7 in the journal *Science*.

More information: Lance B. Price, Policy reforms for antibiotic use claims in livestock, *Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1126/science.abj1823](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abj1823).
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