Farms Reduce Livestock Antibiotic Usage For First Time, Report Shows

The yearly Food and Drug Administration report on the sale of “medically important” antibiotics for food-producing animals has been released, and it’s good news. For the first time since the FDA started tracking these sales in 2009, sales of medically important antibiotics have gone down. They decreased by 14 percent in 2016, and a new FDA policy makes it likely that the trend will continue.

Why Have Sales Dropped?

There has been a concentrated effort from the scientific and medical communities to bring awareness to the issue of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. In 2017, the FDA asked manufacturers to stop selling medically important antibiotics for the use of animal farming. Though this policy request occurred past the deadline for the 2016 yearly report, it does coincide with Canadian and European pushes for livestock raised with fewer antibiotics. With the United States government beginning to take this issue seriously, the sale and use of medically important antibiotics will likely continue to decrease.

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Baby Steps

There are still quite a few questions though. Without a massive overhaul of the factory farming system, farmers need something to replace these antibiotics. Non-antibiotic

treatments are in the work, but data on how that could potentially affect humans hasn't surfaced.

Another concern is the language continually being used – medically important antibiotics. One of the most important reported cases of antibiotic-resistant bacteria is the development of a colistin-resistant bacteria. Colistin was not considered a medically important antibiotic because of the kidney damage it causes, and the product only became medically important when other antibiotics were failing. According to the World Health Organization, there are not enough antibiotics being developed to deal with superbugs. What is the likelihood that one of the medically non-important antibiotics becomes medically necessary?

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Using Data for the Greater Good

In addition to tracking sales, this is the first year that the FDA broke down the sale of antibiotics by animal type, giving a clearer picture of the relationship between food-producing animals and our medication. Restaurants and supermarkets have focused on delivering antibiotic-free chicken, and that's reflected in the numbers. Poultry accounts for only 15 percent of medically important antibiotic sales, while swine and cattle account for 37 and 43 percent, respectively. It's not clear that changes in restaurant policy have changed those figures, but it's silly to think that the company that sells the 37 million nuggets a day doesn't change the way that chicken is produced.

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Progress!

This report is a good sign for a couple of reasons. First, we have a more detailed breakdown of which animals are receiving more antibiotics. Secondly, all of the consumer pressure placed on corporations and governments for healthier options can actually have an effect. The free flow of information can bring about change, but we're running out of time for that. Continued progress is a must.

Sources:

- *For the First Time, Antibiotic Use in Farm Animals Drops* – The Atlantic
- *FDA Announces Implementation of GFI #213, Outlines Continuing Efforts to Address Antimicrobial Resistance* – FDA
- *WHO Says the World Will Run Out of Antibiotics Able to Treat Bacteria Superbugs* – Organic Lifestyle Magazine
- *Pressure's on for on-farm alternatives to antibiotics* – Calgary Herald