

CHAIN REACTION VI

How Top Restaurants Rate On Reducing
Antibiotic Use In Their Beef Supply Chains

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Executive Summary

At the time of the release of this report, the global community is still grappling with a worldwide pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 clearly illustrates how a public health crisis can have devastating impacts on people's health and livelihoods. Impacts have been unevenly distributed, with Black, Indigenous, Latino, and other people of color disproportionately affected. The pandemic is also revealing how effective action — or its opposite, inaction — can change the course of such a crisis. The failure to take needed steps to minimize the spread of the pandemic last year contributed to many unnecessary deaths, while the coordinated roll out of vaccines has shown the benefit of acting.

Antibiotic¹ resistance is another public health crisis facing the globe, with many of these same dynamics, albeit unfolding at a slower pace. Infectious disease experts have warned about bacterial resistance to antibiotic medicines for decades. Recently published estimates indicate that between 35,000 and 160,000 Americans die each year from antibiotic-resistant infections.² Resistance in infections leads to more severe illness, more and longer hospital stays, higher medical costs, and increased mortality.³ The impacts of antibiotic resistance likely fall more heavily on historically marginalized groups in a manner similar to other public health challenges, including COVID-19.⁴

The overuse of antibiotics is the primary driver for the public health crisis of antibiotic resistance.⁵ The pandemic likely contributed to increased antibiotic use in both people⁶ and food animals,⁷ increasing the need for action across all sectors where antibiotics are used. Almost two-thirds of medically important antibiotics in the U.S. are sold for food animal use⁸ and this use contributes significantly to the resistance problem.⁹ Without swift action, experts estimate we will lose 10 million lives globally per year to drug-resistant infections by 2050.¹⁰

This Sixth Chain Reaction Scorecard ranks by letter grade the top twenty fast food and fast casual U.S. restaurant chains that serve beef on the policies and actions related to antibiotic use in their beef supplies.

Five previous editions of the Scorecard¹¹ documented the way in which the nation's top restaurant chains have helped transform antibiotic use practices in the chicken industry by sourcing chicken produced without the routine use of antibiotics.¹² A similar transformation has not yet occurred with the beef, pork, or turkey industries. Because the animals raised by these industries typically live longer than

chickens, there are additional challenges to reducing antibiotic use in these sectors, but comparisons with other countries illustrate that much more can be accomplished.¹³

Previous Scorecards showed limited action by restaurant chains to source beef produced with responsible antibiotic use policies. We define responsible use as policies that prohibit administration of medically important antibiotics to food animals for purposes other than treating sick or injured animals or for controlling the spread of diagnosed illness. This Scorecard continues to focus on beef.

As some of America's largest meat buyers, fast food restaurants can and should act to preserve our life-saving medicines for the future by requiring their meat suppliers to adopt responsible antibiotic use practices. About a quarter of all medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. are intended for use in cattle production, which along with swine, account for over half of all U.S. antibiotic sales.¹⁴ In the past, when resistance made an antibiotic ineffective there was often another drug that would work, but now resistance is spreading faster than the development of new antibiotics making treatment difficult and in some cases impossible.¹⁵ Given the challenge of developing new drugs, much more effort needs to go into protecting the existing ones. This is where food companies can make a difference. McDonald's, for example, is the single largest purchaser of beef in the United States¹⁶ and thus its corporate policies can help push the beef industry to eliminate the overuse of antibiotics and the associated antibiotic resistance. As more restaurant chains adopt policies restricting antibiotic use, pressure increases on beef producers to reduce antibiotic use.

In this Sixth Chain Reaction Scorecard, surveyed companies made little progress transitioning to responsible antibiotic use in their beef supplies in 2020, except for one notable exception, Wendy's. Wendy's committed to prohibiting the routine use of medically important antibiotics in its beef supply chain by the end of 2030.¹⁷ McDonald's in contrast failed to meet its own commitment to set antibiotic use reduction targets by the end of 2020. Other companies reported limited, if any, progress on their commitments.

- » Twelve chains (60 percent) earned "F" grades for taking no public action to reduce antibiotic overuse in their beef supplies. Among the 12 are burger chain giants Burger King and Sonic and the number two restaurant chain in the U.S., Starbucks. The top three pizza chains, Domino's, Pizza Hut, and Little Caesars all received zero points.

- » Wendy's moved up to a "C" grade from last year's "D+" for a new commitment to prohibit the routine use of medically important antibiotics in its beef supply chain by the end of 2030 and for committing to track and report on the use of antibiotics in their beef supply chain by the end of 2024. Two other companies—McDonald's and Subway—received "C" scores for their strong commitments. However, neither company reported any implementation of their pledges. McDonald's in 2018 committed to set reduction targets in beef by the end of 2020, but failed to meet that commitment. Subway promised in 2015 to serve beef raised without the routine use of medically important antibiotics by 2025, but has not reported taking any steps to begin that transition.
- » In 2020, Taco Bell did not report any implementation progress on its 2019 pledge to reduce medically important antibiotics in its beef supplies by 25% by 2025. The company earned a "D".¹⁸
- » Two companies, Applebee's and IHOP, moved from an "F" to a "D" grade for serving a limited amount (7 percent) of responsibly raised beef at their locations.
- » Long-time leaders Chipotle and Panera once again earned grades in the "A" range for their approach to responsible antibiotic use in their beef supplies.

The U.S. beef sector's lack of progress¹⁹ on responsible antibiotic use is concerning, especially when the latest FDA drug sales data show that cattle production, along with hog production, are the two top consumers of agricultural antibiotics by far, with cattle falling slightly behind hogs for the first time in 2019.²⁰ The best way for this sector to act is to adopt and swiftly implement responsible antibiotic use policies.

Other actors in the beef supply chain—including meatpackers²¹, farms and ranches—have an obligation to do the same. Federal and state authorities should prohibit the routine use of antibiotics in food animals and do much more to monitor antibiotic use and antibiotic resistance. Finally, more needs to be done to protect workers on the farm, as well as those in slaughter and meat packing plants, who face significant risk of exposure to resistant pathogens in their workplaces. Public policy on antibiotic resistance must be designed to ensure that interventions address ongoing health disparities and inequities in worker and other vulnerable communities.

Chain Reaction VI Beef Scorecard	
A	
A-	
B+	
B	
B-	
C+	
C	  
D+	
D	  
F	           