Hold the Antibiotics: McDonald’s

McDonald’s raises the bar for responsible antibiotic use in beef

The Big Mac is taking a big bite out of the overuse of antibiotics.

In December, McDonald’s released a new policy to restrict medically important antibiotics in its beef supply chain. It will monitor antibiotic use in its top 10 global beef sourcing markets and set reduction targets by the end of 2020.

Whether you eat at McDonald’s or not, this is an important step forward for public health. We rely on antibiotics to treat life-threatening infections and to ensure that surgery, chemotherapy and other medical procedures are safe. But the overuse of antibiotics is leading to the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, called “superbugs,” that are now shaking the foundations of modern medicine.

“The Golden Arches just raised the bar for responsible antibiotic use in meat production,” said Matt Wellington, director of our national Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign. “McDonald’s new commitment is a promising step forward that will help preserve antibiotics for the future, and that’s something we should all be happy about.”

Misuse of antibiotics is one of the biggest threats to global health today

While overuse in medical settings is a factor in the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, industrialized livestock operations—like the ones that supply McDonald’s beef—play an outsized role in this looming public health threat.

A staggering 70 percent of medically important antibiotics are sold for use in livestock and poultry operations here in the United States. These drugs are routinely given to animals to help them survive crowded, stressful and unsanitary conditions, regardless of whether the animals are actually sick.

The stakes couldn’t be higher. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conservatively estimates that at least 2 million Americans are sickened and 23,000 die each year as a direct result of antibiotic-resistant infections. However, recent estimates suggest more than 150,000 Americans died of antibiotic-resistant infections in 2010.

The World Health Organization has called antibiotic resistance “one of the biggest threats to global health, food security and development today.”

Commitments from McDonald’s, KFC, Subway and more

We shouldn’t allow the meat industry to misuse our life-saving medicines just to make cows a little fatter and burgers a little cheaper.

Continued on Page 3
BIG MONEY OUT

One-by-one, Maryland counties are limiting big money’s influence in elections

Four Maryland counties have now taken action to offset the influence of wealthy special interests over our elections. On Oct. 24, Prince George’s County council members approved a bill establishing small donor public financing for county executive and county council elections. “This is a big win for everyone in the county who wants to see local candidates run on the strength of their ideas, not their access to big money,” said Emily Scarr, Maryland PIRG state director.

On Nov. 6, voters approved a proposition in Baltimore to create the Fair Elections Fund and curb the influence of big money in politics. Now it’s up to the City Council and Mayor to finalize the small-dollar matching program, which should be ready in 2024. Small-donor public financing of elections would limit the influence of wealthy and corporate donors, while encouraging more diverse candidates to run for office. The idea works. Montgomery County used its new small donor program for the first time in 2018.

GET THE LEAD OUT

‘Our kids deserve better’: Lead found in water in Maryland schools

When children returned to Maryland schools last fall, many found taps shut off because the water was tainted with lead—a contaminant that can affect how they think, learn and behave.

New state-mandated testing revealed that schools across the state have elevated levels of lead in their water, while a number of schools have yet to be tested. Efforts are underway to apply filters to the affected pipes, or replace them entirely, but progress is slow.

“There is no safe level of lead in drinking water (or anywhere). Our kids deserve better,” said Emily Scarr, state director of Maryland PIRG Foundation.

Maryland PIRG Foundation has worked for years to get lead out of schools and will continue to make sure our kids are safe from toxins.
McDonald’s raises the bar for responsible antibiotic use in beef

For years, Maryland PIRG and our national network have called on major restaurants, including McDonald’s, to take action. And our advocacy helped persuade McDonald’s to stop serving chicken raised on our life-saving medicines in 2015—a commitment that helped push chicken supplier Tyson Foods to start raising its chickens without routine antibiotics.

KFC, Subway and other restaurants and suppliers quickly followed suit, and we estimate that soon nearly half of all chicken in this country will be raised without the routine use of medically important antibiotics.

McDonald’s newest commitment to reduce the routine use of medically important antibiotics in its beef supply is the culmination of over a year’s work by Maryland PIRG and our coalition partners.

More than 80 international stakeholders, including health, environmental and consumer groups, called on McDonald’s to act. We organized top medical professionals across the country to speak out about the health risks, and our national network delivered more than 150,000 petition signatures to McDonald’s headquarters during its annual shareholder meeting.

Setting off a chain reaction

In October 2018, Maryland PIRG Foundation held an event outside of McDonald’s headquarters to release the collaborative “Chain Reaction IV” report grading the top 25 U.S. burger chains on their antibiotics policies.

McDonald’s received an “F” in the report, and later responded that the company would release a global antibiotics policy for its beef by the end of the year.

Today, we’re pleased that McDonald’s followed through on its pledge to take the next step in restricting antibiotics use. As the largest purchaser of beef in the U.S., McDonald’s action could spark an industry-wide change as the beef industry will now have to meet McDonald’s—and consumers’—demands to reduce the routine use of antibiotics in beef.

With McDonald’s taking an important step in the right direction, Maryland PIRG will continue to work with the burger chain that’s served billions to set strong reduction targets by the end of 2020.

“Consumers called on McDonald’s to hold the antibiotics,” said Matt. “Its response shows progress, and we look forward to seeing the company continue to use its size for good when it comes to preserving life-saving antibiotics.”

By Matt Wellington, director
Campaign to Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics
Ban Roundup

Jury finds Monsanto’s Roundup responsible for man’s terminal cancer

Monsanto has been held accountable for hiding the health risks of Roundup in a California courtroom.

In August 2018, a jury awarded millions in damages to Dewayne Johnson, a former school groundskeeper who claimed his terminal non-Hodgkin lymphoma was caused by years of using the herbicide Roundup. Twenty-six million pounds of Roundup are sprayed on school grounds, parks and gardens every year, and Johnson’s case was the first to go to trial of more than 800 patients suing Monsanto.

“I would never have sprayed that product on school grounds or around people if I knew it would cause harm,” Johnson testified. His lawyer said, “We were finally able to show the jury the secret, internal Monsanto documents proving that Monsanto has known for decades that ... Roundup could cause cancer.”

As the evidence against Roundup piles up, Maryland PIRG is working to protect our public health by banning the herbicide in Maryland.