

# Make EU Consumers' Chicken Safe Without Chemicals

## What is campylobacter and why do we need EU action?

Campylobacter is the **most common cause of food poisoning** in the EU. Official figures suggest that it affects over 200,000 people each year<sup>1</sup>, but the actual number is likely to be far higher and could be as many as 9 million. Typical symptoms of campylobacteriosis include diarrhoea, fever and headache.



## How do people get infected with campylobacter?

**Poultry is the main food source of campylobacteriosis.** According to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), 20% to 30% of human cases of campylobacteriosis may be linked to preparing raw poultry meat or eating undercooked chicken.

**However, bacteria can spread to humans by other ways.** The EU food safety watchdog estimated that 50% to 80% of campylobacteriosis cases may be traced back to live chickens, with campylobacter reaching humans e.g. via the environment or by direct contact.



## How is the European Commission proposing to control campylobacter?

The European Commission has announced a **two-pronged strategy** to control campylobacter in the food chain which it has put forward for discussion with Member States.

The first part of the proposal is to **set a food hygiene limit for campylobacter in poultry carcasses**, as already introduced for salmonella. Member States would verify that slaughterhouses adequately check campylobacter levels remain below this target. If exceeded, everyone along the poultry supply chain would be required to take corrective action (incl. strengthened biosecurity<sup>2</sup> on farms and improved hygiene in slaughterhouses).

The second and more controversial part of the proposal is to allow **poultry carcasses to be washed with peroxyacetic acid (PAA)**, an antimicrobial rinse. Using chemicals to decontaminate meat in the abattoir – at the end of the food chain – is common practice in countries such as the United States and New Zealand. The EU, on the other hand, favours a 'farm to fork' approach that ensures hygiene and safety all along the food production chain via preventive steps.



## Is PAA safe to use?

**EFSA<sup>3</sup> has not identified any major toxicity issues with PAA.** However, the agency could **not clearly rule out the risk of antimicrobial resistance** resulting from using PAA, i.e. campylobacter could develop resistance to this chemical.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/corporate\\_publications/files/factsheetcampylobacter.pdf](http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/corporate_publications/files/factsheetcampylobacter.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> e.g. use of dedicated clothes and footwear by farm workers.

<sup>3</sup> EFSA (2014). Scientific [Opinion](#) on the evaluation of the safety and efficacy of peroxyacetic acid solutions for reduction of pathogens on poultry carcasses and meat.



## What do EU consumers think of chemical meat decontamination?

Studies<sup>4</sup> from the UK, Finland and Denmark show a common pattern: **European consumers prefer meat that has not been treated with chemicals**. No less than 85% of Danes found chlorine washes on meat “totally unacceptable”, while 67% of the British people and close to 90% of the Finns surveyed said they were unlikely to buy chemically-treated chicken. In another piece of research, British consumers were found to prefer alternatives to chemical washes they perceive as more natural (e.g. steam treatment, rapid surface chilling)<sup>5</sup>.



## But what if it could help make chicken safer?

PAA and similar end-of-pipe washes applied in the slaughterhouse only have a limited effect – if any – on meat. As campylobacter can spread from chickens to humans by other pathways, **efforts to control this bacterium must start on farm<sup>6</sup>**.

**In addition, evidence of the efficacy of PAA provided to EFSA is questionable.** It either mostly rests on the effects on harmless bacteria and/or on weak studies.

By contrast, a **range of control options are available** that could be implemented from the farm to the abattoir to make EU consumers' chicken safer. These include **strengthened farm biosecurity, no thinning (where only some of the flock is taken), rapid testing tools** for farmers to check if poultry flocks are contaminated with campylobacter, strict compliance with **good slaughter hygiene**. Setting an EU food hygiene limit for campylobacter would undoubtedly help accelerate the uptake of these measures by



## Couldn't PAA be an “extra safety net” on top of measures earlier in the chain?

We are concerned that, if PAA is authorised, we will move to a system where even less care is taken to prevent campylobacter contamination at the farm level and during the slaughter process. **PAA might (wrongly) be perceived as an “easy fix”**. This is all the more worrying as PAA has questionable efficacy.



## What does BEUC recommend?

**We want the EU to make chicken safer without chemicals.** We fully support the proposal to set a food hygiene limit for campylobacter in poultry as a way of incentivising operators along the chain to improve their practices. But **we adamantly disapprove of PAA authorisation**. Effective campylobacter control requires **early action on the farm**.

Extra end-of-pipe control measures, if any, should be acceptable to EU consumers (e.g. rapid surface chilling or steam-and-ultrasound treatment of poultry carcasses, leak-proof packaging and ‘roast-in-bag’ chicken).

<sup>4</sup> BEUC [position paper](#) (2014). Peroxyacetic acid rinses on poultry meat: the consumer perspective.

<sup>5</sup> Which? and UK Government Office for Science (2015). [Food System Challenges](#).

<sup>6</sup> See EFSA (2011). BIOHAZ panel Scientific [Opinion](#) on Campylobacter in broiler meat production: control options and performance objectives and/or targets at different stages of the food chain.