

Beef producers selling meat with E. coli

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A loophole in U.S. regulations allows companies to sell meat that has come into contact with E. coli as long as it is cooked first.

It is against U.S. Agriculture Department rules to sell raw meat that, during processing, tested positive for the bacterium, a kind of food poisoning that can cause severe stomach cramps, kidney failure or even death, the Chicago Tribune reported Sunday.

But the same meat can be sold in the form of pre-cooked meat such as hamburger patties and meat loaf, the Tribune said. Since E. coli cannot survive the cooking process, the USDA and meat producers say it is safe to sell to consumers, and no one has reported being sickened.

Some public health experts, however, say the loophole helps producers mask unsafe levels of the bacterium in meat-processing facilities, a possible explanation for an unexplained recent rash of E. coli cases.

Topps Meat Co. went out of business after it was forced to recall 21.7 million pounds of ground beef after E. coli was discovered in it, the newspaper said, and General Mills recalled more than 3 million pounds of pizzas made with pepperoni that tested positive for the bacterium.

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