Campylobacter Q&A

February 2016

What is Campylobacter?

Campylobacter (CB) is a naturally occurring bacteria present in the gut of most animals including cattle, pigs and poultry where it lives harmlessly and rarely causes illness. The bacteria are not naturally present in humans and can cause illness if ingested. CB is killed by thorough cooking but can be spread to surfaces and food by poor hygienic practice when handling raw and ready to eat foods at the same time.

What monitoring is being carried out for campylobacter and what are the targets that the industry has committed to?

The presence of CB is being monitored in slaughterhouses where the chickens are processed. Detection is measured by counting Colony Forming Units per gram of chicken (CFU/gm) and split into three levels: less than 100 CFU/gm; between 100 and 1000 per CFU/gm and over 1000 per CFU/gm. Efforts to reduce the presence of CB have concentrated on the most contaminated category (over 1000 CFU/gm).

In 2010, the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Campylobacter, whose membership includes the Food Standards Agency (FSA), Defra, the British Poultry Council, the National Farmers Union and the British Retail Consortium (BRC), agreed a voluntary target to reduce this most highly contaminated category from an incidence of 27 to 19 per cent by 2013. The next target is to achieve 10 per cent by 2015.

What has been achieved so far?

The JWG was very effective in bringing together all the important links within the supply chain to work collaboratively to minimise duplication and make maximum use of available resource. There is no single solution to CB and the joint work has resulted in some interventions being rolled out across the supply chain.

How is industry working together to tackle this issue?

In 2014 the Acting on Campylobacter Together (ACT) board was formed to drive the adoption of interventions by industry. This group consists of Technical Directors of all the major processing companies and some retailers.

Industry has been working hard to make improvements in farming and processing practice and trial interventions. It is unlikely that the target will be met before the end of 2015 in spite of concerted efforts made by the whole of the supply chain. However, a number of exciting new interventions have been introduced to assist to bring down counts. These include:

- Sonosteam – heat and ultrasound treatment of bird surface
- Increased availability of oven ready products
• Enhanced biosecurity on farms e.g. swapping boots in different areas to stop cross-contamination
• No-thinning trials
• Reduce movements in and out of chicken farms to prevent contamination
• Work to improve processing efficiency
• Industry guides to good practice for on farm and processing

Why can’t CB be eradicated?

CB is a naturally occurring bacteria that is present in the environment and gut of chickens and some other animals, for example pigs. It does not affect the health of animals where it is present. It is not naturally present in humans and hence causes health problems, the most common of which is food poisoning when humans ingest it.

The current scientific evidence doesn’t drill down enough into how CB colonises poultry which makes it difficult to determine how to keep it out.

Why haven’t we treated chickens to get rid of CB?

Despite the millions that have been invested there is, currently, no commercially available proven method of eliminating CB. There is currently no vaccine for CB and in any case, it is genetically mobile and some strains would survive treatment by a single vaccine. Antimicrobial treatments are not currently permitted by the EU. Research continues to look for a solution, but in the meantime producers and supermarkets are taking steps to ensure minimal contamination by or destruction of CB. For instance, the introduction of leak-proof packaging has been acknowledged by the FSA as being highly effective in preventing any issues when handling chicken when shopping. Retailers are also working with the FSA to raise awareness of safe poultry preparation among consumers.

Is there nothing we can do about it?

Although we can’t eliminate it with the methods currently available, there are plenty of steps that producers, supermarkets and consumers can take to ensure minimal contamination by or destruction of CB.

What is the industry doing?

The industry has been involved in the joint working groups on CB prevention, including funding research into reducing contamination. The new ACT Board will now take some of this work forward. Retailers are also introducing innovative packaging solutions to minimise the risks of contamination and providing consumers with safety advice and tips on packaging and in-store.

What are supermarkets doing?

Supermarkets insist that their chicken suppliers use accredited and audited food standards. These audits are carried out on a regular basis and the results reported to the supermarkets. Between audits, any untoward incidents are investigated immediately and the certificate can be suspended at any time. The BRC’s own Global Standard is amongst those used by producers.
Each company will have its own multi-disciplinary team including buyers, microbiologists, agricultural managers and poultry technical managers who will focus on minimising CB in their chicken products. Individual retailers are undertaking a number of different initiatives with their suppliers to drive down levels of CB, as well as taking action to make consumers aware of the simple steps they can take to reduce the risk when they prepare their poultry.

Raw chicken has very clear labelling on each pack to advise consumers to cook all chicken thoroughly and avoid cross-contamination (from chopping boards, knives, spatulas and empty packaging) and to wash their hands every time they handle raw meat.

Consumers are reminded of this advice in recipe cards and magazines in store and on websites.

**Are supermarkets doing anything new?**

Retailers have worked with their suppliers to introduce many of the interventions listed above. All major retailers have introduced leak proof packaging for raw chickens to avoid contamination of other goods in trolleys, baskets and fridges.

The latest development is oven-ready packaging so that consumers don’t have to touch raw chicken at all.

Industry is also continuing to invest in research to develop ways of eliminating CB.

Individual retailers are also funding specific projects with their suppliers to trial possible interventions.

**How are retailers working to minimise contamination on the outside of packaging?**

All supermarkets have cleaning programmes for their stores and equipment. Staff training includes awareness of risks related to spillage of raw meat juices and controls include removal of damaged and leaking packs and thorough clean down and disinfection of shelving. However presence cannot be completely avoided due to the natural occurrence of bacteria in the environment, which has the potential for transfer between foods and surfaces.

Supermarkets provide clear labels on products which require further cooking before eating and encourage best practice within the home via specific messaging on pack particularly on raw poultry.

**What do processors do to minimise contamination?**

Producers use standards, such as the BRC Food Standard, in conjunction with independent certificated auditors, to ensure that general hygiene and safety are at the highest standard.

In the event of a suspected problem, investigations including a site audit can be carried out very quickly and certification suspended where necessary. Site customers (the supermarkets) will be alerted to certificate suspension and can choose to stop receiving products from that producer.

**What measures are in place on farms?**
Suppliers and supermarkets, together with the FSA, have worked hard on getting the right measures, known as biosecurity, in place on farms.

The Red Tractor Assurance (RTA) scheme has recently revised its standards and included specific updates for biosecurity.

This includes creating biosecure areas where chickens are housed by changing clothing and footwear, ensuring separation between the outside area and the biosecure area and, very importantly, creating a culture of behaviour amongst the workforce to meet the hygiene and safety procedures set in place by the RTA standard.

What else are farms doing?

New trials are taking place to introduce rapid test methods for use on farms. Other interventions include farmer incentive schemes, enhanced biosecurity during thinning and non-thinning trials.

Is there anything new in the pipeline?

A key control factor for campylobacter is temperature and two new processing techniques which are currently being considered by the poultry industry include:

- Blast Surface Chilling uses very cold air to chill the surface of the bird. This is showing promising effects in trials and work continues to maximise its efficiency before being rolled out further.
- Sanitisation of transport equipment, trials are being undertaken to find better ways to reduce contamination of crates and modules which are used to transport birds from farms to processing plants.

How can consumers play their part?

The advice on measures that consumers can take was highlighted in June’s Food Safety Week and includes:

- Don’t wash raw chicken before cooking because splashes of water around the sink can contaminate hands, surfaces and implements and pass CB on.
- Everything that comes into contact with raw chicken including chopping boards, surfaces, knives and other kitchen implements should be properly washed with hot water and detergent before being used for other food.
- Hands should be washed with hot water and soap after every contact with raw chicken.
- Raw chicken should be kept covered up and chilled in the fridge and on the bottom shelf so that it can’t drip or leak CB onto other food.
- All the packaging from raw chicken needs to be disposed of carefully, followed by thorough handwashing with soap and hot water.
- Chicken must be properly cooked before eating which means the juice runs clear and none of the meat is pink.

For more information and to request an interview please contact:
Fintan Hastings
Senior External Affairs Adviser
Tel: +44 (0)20 7854 8953
Mob: +44 (0) 7921 605 544