

Bacon labels to bring home antibiotic risks

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There is a plethora of labels to tell consumers how their food is made: it could be free range, fair trade or organic, or stamped with a tractor, a lion or an RSPCA assurance mark.

Now a bacon maker in Devon has added one more to the mix — “raised without antibiotics” — as part of a campaign to save humanity from diseases that are resistant to drugs.

The labels, on packets of gammon and bacon, will set them apart from organic products, which limit antibiotics but do not ban them.

“The major concern for human health is the transfer of antibiotic resistant bacteria on meat,” said C  il  n Nunan, from the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, which has endorsed the label. “If animals are fed antibiotics, the bacteria in their gut can become antibiotic resistant and when the animal is slaughtered some of that bacteria inevitably ends up on the meat.”

The project, which is a collaboration between the SpoiltPig food producers, in Devon, and Brydock Farms in the Highlands, is thought to be the first time food in the UK has had such antibiotic branding.

SpoiltPig said it had launched the range in anticipation of global and European legislation to tackle “the threat of antibiotic resistance caused by

overuse in humans and exacerbated by often unnecessary use in farming”.

The mass dosing of farm animals with preventative antibiotics is regarded as one of the main causes of drug resistant bacteria, which the government has described as one of the greatest threats to global health.

Overuse of antibiotics by humans has also fuelled a rise in diseases that render medicines ineffective and raises the prospect of deadly, incurable epidemics.

Zoe Davies, head of the National Pig Association, said that all pig farmers aspired to rearing pigs without antibiotics. However, she said it must be recognised that pigs that do get sick still need to be treated.

If pigs fell sick under the new scheme they could still be treated with antibiotics, SpoiltPig said, but their meat would not be sold with the “reared without antibiotics” tag.

Mr Nunan said the phrase “reared without antibiotics”, had been chosen rather than antibiotic free, because conventional pig farmers already claim that their meat is antibiotic free even if the animal was fed antibiotics during its lifetime, as long as residues in the meat fell below the legal limits.

According to Public Health England, unless more is done to address antibiotic resistance, doctors will lose the ability to treat infections and “routine operations could become deadly in just 20 years”.