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Eat To Live: Hot dog with virus, please!

By Julia Watson

UPI Food Writer

You might feel relieved, when packing your schoolchild off with a boxed lunch of baloney sandwich, to know that it could be served with a dose of virus on the side -- courtesy of the Food and Drug Administration.

On Aug. 18, for the first time ever, the FDA approved viruses as a useful food additive. Not just for ready-to-eat meats but for poultry, too. Before you recoil in fear at the chicken breast you have poised at the end of your fork, viruses, like certain fats, can be good.

On the other hand, you might feel horrified. Is this taking the description "food additive" in a far-reaching direction that could all too easily run out of control?

The concoction that has just been approved has a job to do. It is a cocktail of six different "good" viruses designed to kill off strains of *Listeria monocytogenes* bacterium, which just love cold cuts and poultry as much as we do. It will be sprayed on packaged processed meats.

Unlike other additives, however, whose ranks the virus cocktail will now officially join, it will not be listed on the labels. So you won't know it's there.

Last year 500 Americans died from eating *Listeria*-contaminated ready-to-eat meats and poultry products. Around 2,500 more became seriously ill.

This remarkable FDA approval of a virus for food safety use is a subject, you won't be surprised to hear, that has had Internet bloggers in a frenzy. A sample or two from digg.com:

"How about when the bacteria evolve to be immune to the viruses ... "

"Another problem I see, as some have mentioned is the viruses attacking our natural bacteria flora in our gut. If the virus can sometime down the road attack a friendly bacteria species such as *e. coli* (yea it's good) or *lactobacillus acidophilus* then this could be harmful or at least uncomfortable."

"... a certain bacteriophage turns a certain strain of bacteria into the one that cause Cholera. Another one does Diphtheria."

The coffers-filling possibilities for Intralytix, the firm that came up with the stuff, is another red rag to the bulls. The company has already licensed its spray to a multinational corporation for global use -- but, with unusual caution, refuses to name which one. And it's now angling for FDA approval for viral sprays to treat *E. coli*- and *Salmonella*-contaminated foods.

The Office of Food Additive Safety at the FDA promises we won't be aware through a change in taste of which meats have been treated with these blights in shiny armor.

But perhaps we should be. Perhaps the issue, as the bloggers have it, has nothing to do with taste concerns.

These bacteriophages (from the Greek meaning "bacteria eater") are not unfamiliar to us. They appear in our digestive tracts, as well as in the environment, food and water, doing what they can to keep us healthy by fighting harmful bacteria.

But Byron J. Richards, a certified clinical nutritionist, is particularly vexed over the FDA's approval. Writing on NewsWithView.com on Aug. 24 he denounces the foods due for treatment as "the first virally contaminated foods entering our food supply with the blessings of the FDA." Strong stuff.

The FDA, he suggests, "cannot possibly be certain the viruses will not attack the friendly bacteria that make up the lining of your digestive tract."

"It is true that the viruses, at least at this time, cannot recognize human cells. However, the virus can potentially recognize normal bacterial cells in the human digestive tract and may be able to adapt to infect one or more of these friendly bacteria."

He continues, "Additionally, the human immune system reacts directly to viral phages. Thus, a person who eats a lot of processed deli meat is certain to evoke an immune reaction to the viruses. What will this reaction be? Allergy? Asthma? Autoimmunity? Cancer? How can the FDA approve a food additive that it knows can induce a variety of human immune responses?"

Whether this is all terror-mongering or not, there must be a real concern that introducing bacteriophage viruses into food may be to our long-term detriment. Listeria may develop a resistance to them.

Given that what we are looking to protect here is a very small percentage of the population annually who have adversely suffered from eating contaminated ready-to-eat meats and poultry, would it not be wiser in the long run to put a warning label on these foods?

It would advise those people most commonly ill-affected -- the elderly, the very young, and pregnant women -- to steer clear of them. And the FDA would impose stricter health protocols upon suppliers and at those plants that produce these foods, severely penalizing those whose safety controls are not up to standard.

-- For a delicious cold cut without a viral spray, marinate a flank steak in 3 tablespoons soy sauce, 1 tablespoon olive oil, 1 heaped teaspoon mustard powder, 1 finely minced peeled garlic clove, 1 finely minced small onion for 3 hours.

-- Wipe dry, press both sides into a plate of a handful of crushed black peppercorns and lay into a very, very hot, dry large frying pan. It will smoke, so turn on the fan.

-- Sear 2 minutes one side, then turn and cook 3 the other -- or less if you prefer your meat pink.

-- Take off heat, lay a plate with a weight on it and leave to get cold, then slice very thinly and place between two slices of lightly buttered bread with a scrape of hot mustard or horseradish and a handful of cleaned watercress.

-- Sprinkle with rock salt and eat.



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