



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food and
Nutrition
Service

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Irradiated Commodity Ground Beef Frequently Asked Questions

(Revised July 21, 2004)

Q1. Why will USDA be offering irradiated ground beef for distribution in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)?

The 2002 Farm Bill states that USDA “shall not prohibit the use of any technology to improve food safety that has been approved by the Secretary of Agriculture or has been approved or is otherwise allowed by the Secretary of Health and Human Services” for use in various commodity purchase programs. This includes irradiation.

Protecting the public from foodborne illnesses is a top priority for USDA. Irradiation was approved by USDA as a safe intervention tool for use on raw meat and poultry products in 1999. Schools will have a choice whether to accept irradiated product. For that product which is irradiated, the irradiation will supplement existing food safety requirements. It is not a substitute for proper hygiene, good sanitation practices, and safe-handling and preparation practices in the processing plant and school cafeterias. Nearly two dozen supermarket chains now provide irradiated meat for their customers in some 30 states across the country. Two major restaurant chains offer irradiated meat products in 145 establishments in the Upper Midwestern States.

Q2. In general, what is the proportion of USDA products versus commercially purchased products that are used by schools in the NSLP?

In general, schools receive about 20 percent of the products they serve from USDA, with the remaining 80 percent purchased from local suppliers. However, within the 20 percent provided by USDA, USDA provides nearly all of the NSLP schools’ annual needs for meat, poultry, and cheese.

Q3. Will requirements be in place to ensure that only wholesome and high quality ground beef is irradiated?

Yes. In addition to Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) meat inspection requirements, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) announced on May 1, 2003, a new specification for purchases of all ground beef items. Previous specifications were enhanced by adding new process and testing requirements throughout the manufacturing process. USDA will utilize test results to measure the performance of processing systems producing raw and finished products for purchase by USDA. Both irradiated and non-irradiated products are subject to these new requirements. Irradiated products are subject to additional specifications announced May 29, 2003.

Q4. Will all ground beef items purchased by USDA be subject to irradiation?

No. USDA has added new product lines specifically for irradiated ground beef items to its current list of ground beef items offered to participants in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The new product lines offer an additional food safety assurance through the application of the irradiation process for those NSLP schools that choose to order these products. As of April 2004, schools have had a choice between irradiated and non-irradiated ground beef. This is the same approach that many supermarkets are following with their customers.

Q5. At what point in the manufacturing process will the ground beef items be irradiated?

Ground beef items will be produced under a system of process controls that require microbial testing of boneless beef (trim) for standard plate count, total coliforms, E. coli, coagulase positive staphylococci, E. coli O157:H7, and Salmonella. Boneless beef that does not meet the specification requirements is not permitted in the production of ground beef for USDA. Boneless beef that complies with the specification may be processed into ground beef which also is tested for standard plate count, total coliforms, E. coli, coagulase positive staphylococci, E. coli O157:H7, and Salmonella prior to acceptance by USDA. For irradiated ground beef items, the finished products will be irradiated after they have been produced, packaged, and frozen to 0 degrees F.

Q6. Will the irradiation protocols adopted by USDA follow commercial practice?

Yes. Irradiation protocols have been specified by FSIS and follow commercial practice.

Q7. Will the application of irradiation to ground beef for the National School Lunch Program be sufficient to destroy E. coli O157:H7 and Salmonella?

Irradiation is another tool in helping protect consumers from foodborne illness. It does not guarantee a sterile product. Irradiated ground beef items purchased by USDA will have an additional measure of food safety, beyond the added assurance provided by the new specification announced for ground beef purchases. Safe food handling and preparation, however, still are necessary for these products.

Q8. What has been done to prepare schools for the introduction of irradiated ground beef products?

Before irradiated ground beef products were made available for order by schools, USDA encouraged schools to educate food service personnel, parents, and the community concerning irradiated ground beef products. Shortly after the release of specifications, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provided all school districts with an informational package to help them decide whether to order irradiated beef products beginning April 2004. The package was mailed in

August 2003 and included a letter from Under Secretary Bost strongly encouraging schools to notify parents, students, and the community if they were planning to order irradiated beef. In addition, the package included a brochure with answers to commonly asked questions about irradiation. This letter also included Web site addresses for the brochure as well as the site for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) irradiation consumer information.

The letter gave information regarding the community educational materials developed by the State of Minnesota. The materials were specifically designed to educate communities, parents, students, teachers, school food service personnel, and school administrators. Educational materials emphasize the fact that irradiation does not replace existing food safety requirements for preparing ground beef for distribution in the NSLP. Materials explain that irradiation is a food safety measure which supplements currently required proper hygiene, good sanitation practices, and safe-handling and preparation practices in the processing plant and school cafeterias.

Q9. Will only irradiated ground beef items be offered to NSLP participants?

No. Schools participating in the NSLP will be offered both irradiated and non-irradiated ground beef items. Whether to order is a local school decision.

Q10. When did irradiated ground beef become available for schools to order?

FNS announced that States would be able to offer school districts irradiated commodity ground beef beginning April 2004. Using established procedures and timelines, States notified the Food Distribution Division of the amount of product school districts requested. The requested product will be delivered in August/September 2004. No school district will receive irradiated product unless it is specifically requested.

Q11. Are any school districts currently receiving irradiated USDA commodity foods?

No deliveries have been made to date. However, some States have placed orders for August/September 2004 delivery.

Q12. What if the request from school districts in the State is less than a truckload quantity?

If States have less than truckloads of requested product, USDA would like to accommodate those requests to the extent possible. States will be requested to notify the Food Distribution Division of any orders for irradiated product, regardless of the quantity. FNS and AMS will try to accommodate less than full truckloads as best as they can.

Q13. How will irradiation affect the cost of ground beef?

Generally, the price of irradiated product ranges from \$.13 to \$.20 more than the equivalent non-irradiated product. There are several factors that affect the cost, which include the volume purchased. Currently, we do not know what the extent of demand for irradiated product will be and, therefore, it is hard to predict its effect on the cost. Reimbursements to schools for irradiated food products must be equal to reimbursements to schools for food products that are not irradiated.

Q14. How will schools know if the product has been irradiated?

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 requires that irradiated food products distributed to the Federal school meals program be labeled with a symbol or other printed notice that indicates that the product was irradiated and is prominently displayed in a clear and understandable format on the container. The irradiated product will have its own separate commodity code. Procurement specifications require that the case have FSIS-required markings for irradiated product. The case will include the following international Radura symbol:



Also, the case will have the word “irradiated” in the product name.

Q15. How will the product be packaged?

The bulk fine grind will be vacuum packaged in a thermo formed and tamper proof plastic rectangular shaped container. A case will contain two 10-pound packages. A case will be no more than 4 inches deep, 14 inches wide and 20 inches long. The patties will be in either one 20-pound or two 10-pound packages in a case that will be the same size as the bulk pack.

Q16. Is it possible that a further processor could send product to a school district made with substituted irradiated ground beef without the school district or vendor’s knowledge?

USDA will purchase only two forms of irradiated ground beef - bulk fine grind and patties. Neither of these is diverted to further processors. The coarse grind that USDA purchases to divert to further processors for cooked product is not irradiated.

Q17. What are the requirements in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 for irradiated food products?

The Act directs USDA to develop a policy and establish procedures for the purchase and distribution of irradiated food products. The Act stipulates that irradiated food products be made available only at the request of States and

