

Feature

Europe works together to survey MRSA in pigs



EFSA analysed data from 26 European countries for the first EU-wide survey on methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) in breeding pigs. The results indicate that MRSA, a bacterium resistant to many antibiotics, is commonly detected in holdings with breeding pigs in some European Union (EU) Member States.

All countries followed the same survey design so that the results were comparable. The sampling took place during 2008. Dust samples were taken in the environment of pigs in a total of 5,073 holdings from 24 EU Member States, as well as Norway and Switzerland. The pooled sample of each holding was tested for the presence of the various MRSA strains.

Seventeen of the surveyed Member States found some type of MRSA in their holdings with breeding pigs and seven had none at all. On average, different types of MRSA were found in 1 out of 4 holdings with breeding pigs across the

EU, but figures varied greatly between Member States. MRSA ST398 was the most reported type of MRSA among holdings with breeding pigs in the EU. Only six Member States and one non-Member State reported MRSA non-ST398 in the holdings with breeding pigs. The prevalence of MRSA non-ST398 in holdings with breeding pigs across the participating Member States was substantially lower than the prevalence of MRSA and of MRSA ST398.

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MRSA is a major concern for public health and its various types are recognised as an important cause of hospital-acquired infections in humans. The specific type MRSA ST398 has been identified in some domestic animals and is considered an occupational health risk for farmers, veterinarians and their families, who may become exposed to it through direct or indirect contact with these animals. In an opinion published in March 2009, EFSA's Biological Hazards (BIOHAZ) Panel assessed the public health significance of MRSA in animals and food, and concluded that the MRSA ST398 strain is less likely to contribute to

the spread of MRSA in hospitals than other types carried by humans. The Panel also said that there is currently no evidence that MRSA ST398 can be transmitted to humans by eating or handling contaminated food.

EFSA recommends monitoring of pigs and other food producing animals for MRSA. It also says further research should be carried out, so that the reasons for differences in the prevalence of MRSA in the various Member States can be identified and used to propose options on possible control measures.

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Interview

The importance of data collection to EFSA and Member States

> **Stefan Fabiansson**, *Head of EFSA's Data Collection and Exposure Unit*

? Why are exposure data so important?

> **Stefan Fabiansson** Dietary exposure calculations are important parts of much of the risk assessment work that EFSA carries out. Exposure data are key to our scientific advice. By combining how much of a given hazard is present in a particular food, with the consumption levels of that food by different population groups, we can estimate, and hence, assess the dietary exposure to that hazard. Once we know who is exposed – adults, children etc - and to what extent, you can assess the risk and provide the advice that risk managers need.



? What is the role of Member States in this process?

National authorities in EU Member States analyse food for the levels of contaminants and gather food consumption data about their citizens. They send the results to EFSA's Data Collection and Exposure (DATEX) unit which uses them to build a bigger, and better, picture of exposure across Europe. The role of Member States is crucial to the whole process.

? How does this work in practice?

The DATEX unit networks with the various European countries to collect, collate and analyse the data we need to conduct European exposure assessments. Depending on the dataset, we can identify regional differences and trends, which help Europe's policy-makers in Member States, and the Commission, to take effective, proportionate and timely decisions to protect the public from contaminant hazards. Depending on the type of information needed, DATEX also launches open calls for data from a wide range of sources.

? How do Member States and Europe benefit?

By pooling such data from across Europe, larger datasets can be built. This allows EFSA to identify differences and similarities between population groups, and to highlight the impact of different dietary patterns. Trends over time can also be established. Drawing on extensive exposure data permits EFSA to conduct comprehensive risk assessments and to deliver robust scientific advice to decision-makers across Europe. Collecting such data also allows EFSA to rapidly respond to urgent requests for advice, so that potential risks can be quickly calculated, enabling risk managers to act rapidly, if needed.

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Meeting with national experts on Dietary Reference Values

Barcelona, 7 September 2009

EFSA scientists organised a special meeting with nutrition experts from Member States to exchange views on draft opinions published in the area of Dietary Reference Values (DRVs) covering fats, carbohydrates, fibres and water, as well as Food-Based Dietary Guidelines.

The meeting, held on 7-8 September 2009 in Barcelona, was an opportunity to discuss with Member States the issues surrounding the draft opinions, to brief the national experts about the comments received during the consultation period and to clarify EFSA's scientific role in determining the DRVs.

Professor Albert Flynn, Chair of EFSA's Panel on Dietetic Products, Nutrition and Allergies (NDA) said: *"Following a successful public consultation, a further valuable contribution was received from national experts that enables EFSA to finalise its draft opinions on DRVs."*



The Barcelona meeting also addressed EFSA's continuing work on DRVs and any possible co-operation with Member States on the remaining assessment of DRVs for micronutrients. EFSA expressed interest in receiving the most recent scientific data available at national level, necessary for finalisation of the scientific opinions.

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More collaboration on animal health and welfare risk assessments welcomed, finds survey

Member States strongly support greater collaboration and networking Europe-wide on animal health and welfare, and for harmonising risk assessment approaches, according to the results of a pan-European EFSA survey. The survey sought to better understand how different countries assess their animal health and welfare risks, as an important element of enhancing scientific co-operation in this subject.



Almost half of the countries clearly separate risk assessment from risk management. Risk assessments were found to be mainly organised at a governmental level and in two thirds of the cases the same institution deals with animal health and animal welfare. The balance of risk assessments also tends to fall more on animal health than on animal welfare.

The experts doing the assessments are mainly organised in panels or advisory bodies. Adoption of the risk assessments

is carried about by consensus which sometimes includes a hearing of risk managers and stakeholders.

The survey information was provided by national representatives on animal health and welfare. It is this working together with Member States, as envisaged in EFSA's strategy for co-operation and networking, that will further improve dialogue among relevant countries, and enhance knowledge on and confidence in the scientific assessments carried out in EU. Examples include EFSA's combined work with Member States on bee mortality, and the stunning and killing of farmed fish.

National representatives met in May 2008 and then again in May 2009. Both meetings helped representatives share information and build bridges for closer cooperation among themselves and with EFSA.

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EFSA has been continuing to harmonise risk assessment approaches across all of its areas of work, including animal health and welfare. For this the Authority needs to better know the current situation in the different countries throughout Europe. As a result the Authority's Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) unit ran a survey on the organisation, approach and procedures applied in risk assessments on animal health and welfare in EU Member States and Iceland, Norway and Switzerland. The survey asked how the relevant national bodies that run animal health and welfare risk assessments are organised, and enquired about their responsibilities and tasks.

The findings showed that Member States are clearly interested in networking, ensuring the independence of the risk assessment process, exchanging scientific data and information, and having more developed and harmonised risk assessment methodologies.

EFSA launches a knowledge database on 3-MCPD esters

Research institutes, industry bodies and other parties that carry out or commission research projects on 3-MCPD esters are invited to submit information on these projects to EFSA. Further data are needed to assess the possible risks posed by these contaminants to human health. This da-

tabase will serve as a platform for sharing information and will help to ensure that effective progress is made in this field. EFSA will regularly update the database with the input received.

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Update on Focal Points

Sixth national Focal Point meeting

EFSA and national Focal Points met for the 6th time on 9-10 September in Parma to discuss areas of common interest and provide an update on their latest activities. Some of the highlights included:

New participants

For the first time, representatives from the EU Candidate Countries attended the meeting. They were invited as part of EFSA's Pre-Accession Programme which aims to promote the understanding of EFSA's work in the Candidate Countries; to share experience; to create information exchange mechanisms; and to ensure that the national authorities of these countries can participate effectively in the activities of EFSA. As part of the meeting, the

food safety systems of Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey were presented to the Focal Points and EFSA.

Planned activities

To better understand the short term risk assessment activities of EU Member States as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, EFSA and Focal Points initiated a project on sharing information on planned risk assessment activities in their countries.

The next Focal Point meeting will take place in Paris on 27-28 January 2010.

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