Canada Catching Up on Food Safety — Beef Irradiation Approved

By Ruth Kava — February 27, 2017

Canada recently (finally) approved the use of irradiation to safeguard fresh and frozen ground beef. The United States has allowed its use for that purpose (and many others) since 1999. And over 60 countries world-wide also permit the use of this safe deterrent for foodborne illness. According to Health Canada (their version of the FDA), irradiation is permitted only on potatoes, onions, wheat, flour, whole wheat flour, spices and dehydrated seasonings, and now on ground beef.

As in the United States, Canadian foods that are irradiated must carry the radura — the radiation symbol, seen below, as well as text stating that the item has been irradiated.
Although we've discussed the benefits and lack of risks of food irradiation many times in the past (for example see here [4]), it's worth reviewing some of the most salient points about the process.

First, use of low-dose irradiation kills pathogenic organisms such as E. coli, Salmonella, and other bacteria, as well as parasites that might be present in foods (e.g. Trichinella in pork). It cannot and does not make food radioactive. Properly applied, food irradiation doesn't alter the appearance or taste of foods. Since it is used at the end of processing (in the case of ground meat, after the meat has been ground), there are fewer chances for recontamination.

Irradiation can also improve the shelf life of some fresh foods. For example, it can reduce or eliminate sprouting of potatoes. Irradiation of dried herbs and spices can eliminate molds and help preserve freshness, and treatment of imported fresh produce can eliminate exotic pests and prevent their dispersal.

When ionizing radiation is produced by electron beam or X-ray machines (such as are used for dental X-rays), no radioactive material is needed, and there is no radioactive waste produced.

So we hope that our neighbors to the north take advantage of this modern technology to enhance the freshness and safety of their food supply, and extend their approval of irradiation to other foods.