

QUESTIONS TO ASK A HOG FARMER

ASKING QUESTIONS is the best way to ensure that you're purchasing sustainably raised, healthy foods, and supporting sustainable farmers. Here are some questions to get you started.

HOW ARE YOUR HOGS RAISED?

Ideally, you're looking for hogs that have been raised outdoors on pasture and in fields. In areas of the country where winters are quite cold, hogs should have comfortable barns or sustainable structures, like hoop houses (plastic-covered greenhouses), where they have space to carry out their natural behaviors, such as rooting and nesting, and they should be provided proper bedding materials, such as straw. Even in winter months, they should also have the ability to go outdoors.

WHERE ARE YOUR HOGS BORN?

One of the most troubling aspects of factory hog production is the treatment of pregnant sows (female pigs). The sows may spend their entire lives in "farrowing pens," small crates with metal bars that are too small to turn around in, standing on slatted floors, with every natural instinct to build nests and nurture piglets thwarted. Many farmers buy the piglets they raise, so it's better if they weren't born in one of these industrial facilities. The best scenario is if the hogs are born and spend their lives on a sustainable farm.

HOW MUCH TIME DO YOUR HOGS SPEND OUTDOORS EACH DAY?

Having "access" to outdoors isn't good enough — some companies interpret that as a small opening onto a concrete patio. Find out if the hogs go out onto fields or pasture, and ask how much time each day the animals spend there. There's a big difference between 4 minutes and 4 hours.

WHAT DO YOU FEED YOUR HOGS?

Sustainably raised hogs are allowed to forage in the dirt and eat roots and bugs. Their diets are supplemented with

corn, soy, vegetables and vegetable peelings, extra dairy products, and table scraps. Ideally, a farmer will grow the grain and soybeans that are fed to the animals. Factory farmed hogs are raised primarily on genetically modified corn and soy.

Their feed can be supplemented with bakery products, limestone, fishmeal, copper, choline chloride, antibiotics, blood cells, and sodium selenite, among other things.

ARE YOUR HOGS EVER GIVEN ANTIBIOTICS?

Some consumers only want to eat meat that was never given antibiotics, even to treat illness. Other consumers are okay with the therapeutic use of antibiotics, meaning that the animals are treated with antibiotics only if they get sick. You need to decide which is best for you. Any animal fed a low dose of antibiotics on a continual basis, either to promote growth or to ward off possible disease, is an animal that was raised on an unsustainable factory farm. Meat from these animals should be avoided.

ARE HORMONES OR FEED ADDITIVES GIVEN TO YOUR HOGS?

By law, hormones cannot be given to hogs, but they can be fed additives to make them grow faster. These additives are not considered hormones, but there is concern that they may affect human health. It is best to find farmers who do not feed their animals any type of hormones, growth enhancers or any type of synthetic feed additives. You also may want to ask if animal protein was part of their diet. Hogs are meat eaters, so they can be fed meat on both sustainable and unsustainable farms. What you are concerned about is whether any of the animal protein fed to the hogs contained hormones. If a hog is fed beef or a beef byproduct, that beef could conceivably contain hormones — this is one way hormones are thought to get into the pork supply. It is uncertain whether this type of hormone transmission is affecting human health, so you must decide whether or not this is important to you.

