



United States Department of Agriculture  
Food Safety and Inspection Service

## Food Safety Information



# Inspection & Grading of Meat and Poultry: What Are the Differences?

*The inspection and grading of meat and poultry are two separate programs within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Inspection for wholesomeness is **mandatory** and is paid for out of tax dollars. Grading for quality is **voluntary**, and the service is requested and paid for by meat and poultry producers/processors.*

### Mandatory Federal Inspection

American consumers can be confident that the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the public health agency in the USDA, ensures that meat and poultry products are safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged.

Under the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act, FSIS inspects all raw meat and poultry sold in interstate and foreign commerce, including imported products. The Agency monitors meat and poultry products after they leave federally inspected plants.

In addition, FSIS monitors State inspection programs, which inspect meat and poultry products sold only within the State in which they were produced. The 1967 Wholesome Meat Act and the 1968 Wholesome Poultry Products Act require State inspection programs to be "at least equal to" the Federal inspection program. If States choose to end their inspection program or cannot maintain this standard, FSIS must assume responsibility for inspection within that State.

In these efforts to protect the safety and integrity of meat and poultry products, FSIS works with many other agencies, including other agencies within the USDA, State inspection programs, the Food and Drug Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Since the Federal inspection program began at the turn of the century, the meat and poultry industries have grown and changed significantly. In the early 1900's, most meat came from local slaughter plants

and was used locally. Further processing was limited to simple products such as sausages. Today, however, a wide variety of meat and poultry products are on the market. Animals are slaughtered and meat is processed in sophisticated, high-volume plants. The meat is often shipped great distances to reach consumers.

As the industry changed, FSIS began changing inspection. In earlier days, the primary concern of the inspectors was animal diseases, and they relied almost exclusively on visual inspection of animals, products, and plant operations. However, refinements in animal production reduced disease and created a more homogeneous animal population. Thus, the concerns of today's inspectors are broader and include unseen hazards such as microbiological and chemical contamination. The requirements in the "Pathogen Reduction; Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) Systems" final rule are designed to minimize the likelihood of harmful bacteria being present in raw meat and poultry products. However, some bacteria

### Safe Handling Instructions

*This product was prepared from inspected and passed meat and/or poultry. Some food products may contain bacteria that could cause illness if the product is mishandled or cooked improperly. For your protection, follow these safe handling instructions.*



Keep refrigerated or frozen.  
Thaw in refrigerator or microwave.



Keep raw meat and poultry separate from other foods.  
Wash working surfaces (including cutting boards),  
utensils, and hands after touching raw meat or poultry.



Cook thoroughly.



Keep hot foods hot. Refrigerate leftovers  
immediately or discard.

The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is the public health agency in the U.S. Department of Agriculture responsible for ensuring that the nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged.

**USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline**  
**1-888-MPHotline**  
**(1-888-674-6854)**

could be present and might become a problem if meat and poultry are not handled safely. To assist food handlers, the **USDA requires that safe handling instructions** be put on all packages of raw and not fully cooked meat and poultry.

Every establishment is required to reassess the adequacy of its HACCP plan at least annually and whenever any changes occur that could affect its hazard analysis or alter its HACCP plan. The establishment may reassess its HACCP plan, or plans, any time during the calendar year to meet the annual reassessment requirement.

**Voluntary Federal inspection** for animals not covered under mandatory inspection (i.e., buffalo, rabbit, reindeer, elk, deer, antelope) is handled under the Agricultural Marketing Act. This Act gives the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to take whatever steps are necessary to make the product marketable. The FSIS inspector must have knowledge about that particular species and the carcass must fit available equipment in the plant. Businesses that request voluntary inspection must pay an hourly fee for the service whereas mandatory inspection is funded by tax dollars.

Meat that has been federally inspected and passed for wholesomeness is stamped with a round purple mark. The dye used to stamp the grade and inspection marks onto a meat carcass is made from a food-grade vegetable dye and is not harmful. (The exact formula is proprietary/owned by the maker of the dye.) The mark is put on carcasses and major cuts. After trimming, the mark might not appear on retail cuts such as roasts and steaks. However, meat that is packaged in an inspected facility will have an inspection mark which identifies the plant on the label.



Inspection mark on raw meat



Inspection mark on raw poultry



Inspection mark on processed products

## Grading

After the meat and poultry are inspected for wholesomeness, producers and processors may request to have the products graded for quality by a licensed Federal grader. The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service is the agency responsible for grading meat and poultry. Those who request grading must pay for the service. Grading for quality means the evaluation of traits related to tenderness, juiciness, and flavor of meat; and, for poultry, a normal shape that is fully fleshed and meaty and free of defects.

USDA grades are based on nationally uniform Federal standards of quality. No matter where or when a consumer purchases graded meat or poultry, it must have met the same grade criteria. The grade is stamped on the carcass or side of beef and is usually not visible on retail cuts. However, retail packages of beef, as well as poultry, will show the U.S. grade mark if they have been officially graded.

The grade symbol and wording are no longer copyrighted; however, according to the Truth in Labeling Law, it is illegal to mislead or misrepresent the shield or wording.

## USDA Grades for Meat and Poultry

### Beef

Beef is graded as whole carcasses in two ways:

- **quality grades** - for tenderness, juiciness, and flavor; and
- **yield grades** - for the amount of usable lean meat on the carcass. There are eight quality grades for beef. Quality grades are based on the amount of marbling (flecks of fat within the lean), color, and maturity.

### Quality Grades:

- **Prime grade** is produced from young, well-fed beef cattle. It has abundant marbling and is generally sold in restaurants and hotels. Prime roasts and steaks are excellent for dry-heat cooking (broiling, roasting, or grilling).



- **Choice grade**

is high quality, but has less marbling than Prime. Choice roasts and steaks from the loin and rib will be very tender, juicy, and flavorful and are, like Prime, suited to dry-heat cooking. Many of the less tender cuts, such as those from the rump, round, and blade chuck, can also be cooked with dry heat if not overcooked. Such cuts will be most tender if “braised” – roasted or simmered with a small amount of liquid in a tightly covered pan.



- **Select grade**

is very uniform in quality and normally leaner than the higher grades. It is fairly tender, but, because it has less marbling, it may lack some of the juiciness and flavor of the higher grades. Only the tender cuts (loin, rib, sirloin) should be cooked with dry heat. Other cuts should be marinated before cooking or braised to obtain maximum tenderness and flavor.



- **Standard and Commercial grades**

are frequently sold as ungraded or as “store brand” meat.

- **Utility, Cutter, and Canner grades**

are seldom, if ever, sold at retail but are used instead to make ground beef and processed products.

## Yield grades

range from “1” to “5” and indicate the amount of usable meat from a carcass. Yield grade 1 is the highest grade and denotes the greatest ratio of lean to fat; yield grade 5 is the lowest yield ratio. Yield grade is most useful when purchasing a side or carcass of beef for the freezer.

## Veal/Calf

There are five grades for veal/calf: **prime**, **choice**, **good**, **standard**, and **utility**.

- **Prime and choice grades** are juicier and more flavorful than the lower grades. Because of the young age of the animals, the meat will be a light grayish-pink to light pink, fairly firm, and velvety. The bones are small, soft, and quite red. Cuts such as chops can be cooked by the dry-heat methods of roasting, grilling or broiling.

## Lamb

There are five grades for lamb. Normally only two grades are found at the retail level – **prime** and **choice**. Lower grades of lamb and mutton (meat from older sheep) – **good**, **utility**, and **cull** – are seldom marked with the grade. Lamb is produced from animals less than a year old. Since the quality of lamb varies according to the age of the animal, it is advisable to buy lamb that has been USDA graded.

- **Prime grade**

is very high in tenderness, juiciness, and flavor. Its marbling enhances both flavor and juiciness.

- **Choice grade**

has slightly less marbling than prime, but still is of very high quality. Most cuts of prime and choice grade lamb (chops, roasts, shoulder cuts, and leg) are tender and can be cooked by the dry-heat methods (broiling, roasting, or grilling). The less tender cuts – breast, riblets, neck, and shank – can be braised to make them more tender.

## Pork

Pork is not graded with USDA quality grades as it is generally produced from young animals that have been bred and fed to produce more uniformly tender meat. Appearance is an important guide in buying fresh pork. Look for cuts with a relatively small amount of fat over the outside and with meat that is firm and grayish pink in color. For best flavor and tenderness, meat should have a small amount of marbling.

Pork’s consistency makes it suitable for a variety of cooking styles. Chops can be prepared by pan broiling, grilling, baking, braising, or sautéing. Ribs can be braised, roasted, or grilled. Slow cooking yields the most tender and flavorful results. Tenderloins are considered to be the most tender and tasty cut of pork.

## Poultry

The USDA grades for poultry are **A**, **B**, and **C**.

- **Grade A** is the highest quality and the only grade that is likely to be seen at the retail level. This grade indicates that the poultry products are virtually free from defects such as bruises, discolorations, and feathers. Bone-in products have no broken bones. For whole birds and parts with the skin on, there are no tears in the skin or exposed flesh that could dry out during cooking, and a good covering of fat under the skin. Also, whole birds and parts will be fully fleshed and meaty.



The U.S. grade shield for poultry may be found on the following chilled or frozen ready-to-cook poultry products: whole carcasses and parts, as well as roasts, tenderloins, and other boneless and/or skinless poultry products that are being marketed. There are no grade standards for necks, wing tips, tails, giblets, or ground poultry.

- **Grades B and C** poultry are usually used in further-processed products where the poultry meat is cut up, chopped, or ground. If sold at retail, they are usually not grade identified.

For more information about meat and poultry grading, go to USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) website at [www.ams.usda.gov/](http://www.ams.usda.gov/)

## Food Safety Questions?

### Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**; TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



The Hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov).

Send E-mail questions to [MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov](mailto:MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov).

### Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7.



[AskKaren.gov](http://AskKaren.gov)