

Challenging times for broilers? Phytomolecules, not antibiotics, are the answer



by **Ajay Bhoyar**, Global Technical Manager, EW Nutrition

Anyone working with today's fast-growing broiler chicken knows that it is a sensitive creature – and so is its gut health. Thanks to continuous improvements in terms of [genetics and breeding](#), nutrition and feeding, as well as general management strategies, broiler production has tremendously upped performance and efficiency over the past decades. It is estimated that, between 1957 and 2005, the [broiler growth rate increased by over 400%, while the feed conversion ratio dropped by 50%](#).

These impressive improvements, however, have come at the cost of intense pressure on the birds' digestive system, which needs to process large quantities of feed in little time. To achieve optimal growth, a broiler's [gastrointestinal tract \(GIT\)](#) needs to be in perfect health, all the time. Unsurprisingly, enteric

diseases such as [necrotic enteritis](#), which severely damages the intestinal mucosa, hamper the intestines' capacity to absorb nutrients and induce an inflammatory immune response.

The modern broiler's gut - a high-performing, but sensitive system

However, in a system as high performing as the modern broiler's GIT, much less can lead to problems. From when they are day-old chicks up to slaughter, broilers go through several challenging phases during which they are more likely to show impaired gut functionality, e.g. after vaccinations or feed changes. [Good management practices go a long way towards eliminating unnecessary stressors](#) for the animals, but some challenging periods are unavoidable.

The transition from starter to grower diets is a classic situation when nutrients are very likely to not be well digested and build up in the gut, fueling the proliferation of harmful microbes. Immunosuppressive stress in combination with an immature intestinal microflora results in disturbances to the bacterial microbiota. At "best", this entails temporarily reduce nutrient absorption, in the worst case the birds will suffer serious intestinal diseases.

Phytomolecules - the intelligent alternative to antibiotics

To safeguard performance during stressful periods, poultry producers need to anticipate them and proactively provide effective gut health support. For many years, this support came in the form of antibiotic growth promoters (AGP): administered prophylactically, they were effective at keeping harmful enteric bacteria in check. However, due to grave concerns about the [development of antimicrobial resistance](#), non-therapeutic antibiotics use has been banned in many countries. Alternatives need to focus on improving feed digestibility and strengthening gut health, attacking the root causes of why the intestinal microflora would become unbalanced in the first place.

Phytomolecules are secondary metabolites active in the defense mechanisms of plants. Studies have found that certain phytomolecules [stimulate digestive enzyme activities](#) and stabilize the gut microflora, "leading to improved feed utilization and less exposure to growth-depressing disorders associated with digestion and metabolism" (Zhai et al., 2018). With other trials showing [positive effects on broilers' growth performance and feed conversion](#), the research indicates that phytomolecules might also specifically support chickens during challenging phases.

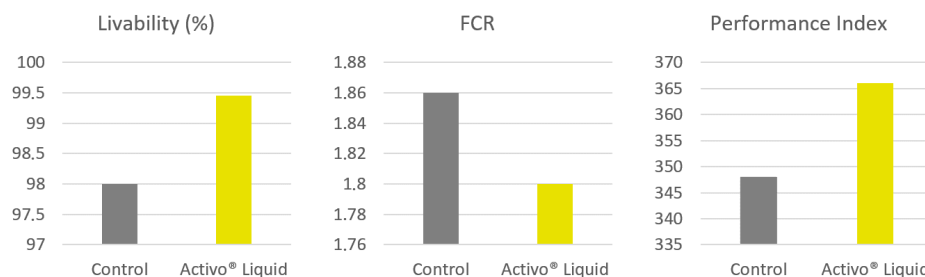
The effect of phytomolecules on broilers during a challenging phase

A study was conducted over a period of 49 days on a commercial broiler farm of an AGP-free integration operation in Japan. The farm reported gut health challenges in the second and third week of the fattening period due to vaccinations and changes to the animals' diets. The trial included 15504 Ross 308 broilers, divided into two groups. The negative control group included a total of 7242 birds, kept in another house.

All the birds were fed the standard feed of the farm. The trial group (8262 birds) received Activo Liquid, which contains a synergistic combination of phytomolecules, administered directly through the drinking water. Activo Liquid was given at an inclusion rate of 200ml per 1000L of water (3.3 US fl oz per gallon of stock solution, diluted at 1:128), from day 8 until day 25, for 8 hours a day.

The results are summarized in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Improved broiler performance for Activo Liquid group (day 49)



The Activo Liquid group clearly showed performance improvements compared to the control group. Livability augmented by 1.5%, while the feed conversion rate improved by 3.2%. This resulted in a more than 5% higher score in terms of the performance index.

Challenging times? Tackle them using phytomolecules

Poultry producers take great care to eliminate unnecessary sources of stress for their birds. Nonetheless, during their lifecycle, broiler chickens face challenging periods during which the balance of the intestinal microflora can easily become disturbed, with consequences ranging from decreased nutrient absorption to full-blown enteric disease.

The trial reviewed here showed that, after receiving Activo Liquid, broilers raised without AGPs showed encouraging performance improvements during a challenging phase of feed changes and vaccinations. Likely thanks to the activation of digestive enzymes and a stabilization of the gut flora, the broilers showed improved livability and feed conversion, thus delivering a much more robust performance during a critical phase of their lives. In times where the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics is no longer an option, phytomolecules allow poultry farmers to effectively support their animals during challenging times.

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Photo Source: [Aviagen](#)

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Phytomolecules: Boosting Poultry Performance without Antibiotics



Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a major threat to global public health. It is largely caused by the overuse of antibiotics in human medicine and agriculture. In intensive poultry production most antibiotics are used as antimicrobial growth promoters and/or used as prophylactic and metaphylactic treatments to healthy animals. Reducing such antibiotic interventions is crucial to lowering the incidence of AMR. However, antibiotic reduction often results in undesirable performance losses. Hence alternative solutions are needed to boost poultry performance. Phytomolecules have antimicrobial, digestive, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, which could make them key to closing the performance gap.

Poultry performance depends on intestinal health

Poultry performance is to a large extent a function of intestinal health. The intestines process nutrients, electrolytes and water, produce mucin, secrete immunoglobulins and create a barrier against antigens and pathogens.

In addition, it is an important component of the body's immune defense system. The intestine has to identify pathogens and reject them, but also has to tolerate harmless and beneficial microorganisms. If the intestines do not function properly this can lead to food intolerance, dysbiosis, infections and diseases. All of these are detrimental to feed conversion and therefore also to animal performance.

Antibiotics reduce the number of microorganisms in the intestinal tract. From a performance point of view this has two benefits: first, the number of pathogens is reduced and therefore also the likelihood of diseases; second, bacteria are eliminated as competitors for the available nutrients. However, the overuse of antibiotics not only engenders AMR: antibiotics also eliminate probiotic bacteria, which negatively impacts the digestive tracts' microflora.

Products to boost poultry performance may be added to their feed or water. They range from pre- and probiotics to medium chain fatty acids and organic acids to plant extracts or phytomolecules. Especially the latter have the potential to substantially reduce the use of antibiotics in poultry farming.

Phytomolecules are promising tools for antibiotic reduction

Plants produce phytomolecules to fend off pathogens such as moulds, yeasts and bacteria. Their antimicrobial effect is achieved through a variety of complex mechanisms. Terpenoids and phenols, for example, disturb or destroy the pathogens' cell wall. Other phytomolecules inhibit their growth by influencing their genetic material. Studies on broilers show that certain phytomolecules reduce the adhesion of pathogens such as to the wall of the intestine. Carvacrol and thymol were found to be effective against different species of *Salmonella* and *Clostridium perfringens*.

There is even evidence that secondary plant compounds also possess antimicrobial characteristics against antibiotic resistant pathogens. In-vitro trials with cinnamon oil, for example, showed antimicrobial effects against methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, as well as against multiresistant *E. coli*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae* and *Candida albicans*.

Importantly, there are no known cases to date of bacteria developing resistances to phytomolecules. Moreover, phytomolecules increase the production and activity of digestive enzymes, they suppress the metabolism of pro-inflammatory prostaglandins and they act as antioxidants. Their properties thus make them a promising alternative to the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics.

Study design and results

In order to evaluate the effect of phytomolecules on poultry performance, multiple feeding studies were conducted on broilers and laying hens. They were given a phytogenic premix ([Activo](#), EW Nutrition GmbH) that contains standardized amounts of selected phytomolecules.

To achieve thermal stability during the feed processing and a targeted release in the birds' [gastrointestinal tract](#), the product is microencapsulated. For each , the studies evaluated both the tolerance of the premix and the efficacy of different dosages.

Study I: Evaluation of the dose dependent efficacy and tolerance of Activo for broilers

Animals: 400 broilers; age: 1-35 days of age

Feed: Basal starter and grower diets

Treatments:

- No supplement (negative control)
- 100 mg of Activo /kg of feed
- 1.000 mg of Activo /kg of feed
- 10.000 mg of Activo /kg of feed

Parameters: weight gain, feed intake, feed conversion ratio, health status, and blood parameters

Results: The trial group given the diet supplemented with 100 mg/kg [Activo](#) showed significant improvements in body weight gain during the starter period (+4%) compared to the control group.

Additional significant improvements in feed conversion ratio (FCR) in the growing period (+4%) resulted in an overall improvement in FCR of 3%. At a 1.000 mg/kg supplementation, a significant improvement in FCR of 6% was observed over the entire feeding period. Hematological parameters were within the reference range of healthy birds when feeding up to 10,000 Activo/ kg of feed.

Study II: Evaluation of the dose depending efficacy and tolerance of Activo for laying hens

Animals: 200 hens; age: 20 to 43 weeks

Feed: basal diet for laying hens

Treatments:

- No supplement (negative control)
- 100 mg of Activo/ kg of feed
- 250 mg of Activo/ kg of feed
- 500 mg of Activo/ kg of feed
- 5.000 mg of Activo/ kg of feed

Parameters: weight gain, feed intake, feed conversion ratio, health status, and blood parameters

Results: Inclusion levels from 100 mg/kg of Activo onwards improved laying performance, egg mass and egg weight and reduced FCR compared to the control group. Results recorded for hematological parameters were within the reference range of healthy birds when feeding up to 5.000 mg Activo/ kg of feed.

Study III: Evaluation of the dose-dependent effects of Activo for coccidiosis vaccinated broilers

Animals: 960 broiler chickens; age: 42 days

Feed: Standard starter and finisher feed

Treatments:

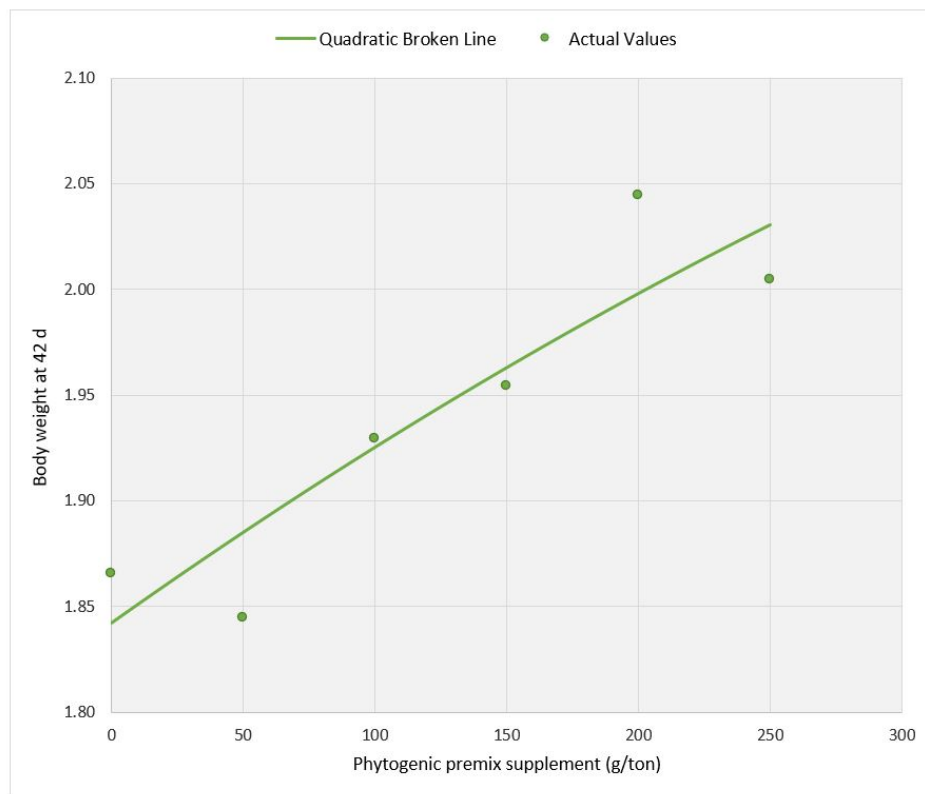
- No supplement (negative control)
- 50 g of Activo /US ton of feed
- 100 g of Activo /US ton of feed
- 150 g of Activo /US ton of feed
- 200 g of Activo /US ton of feed
- 250 g of Activo /US ton of feed
- Antibiotic growth promoter (AGP)(positive control)

Parameters: weight gain, feed efficiency

Specific: In order to represent field conditions, the birds were challenged with used, homogenized litter.

Results: A clear dose response for both body weight gain and feed efficiency was observed (see Figure 1): the more phytogenic premix given, the better the birds' performance. The group with 200g of Activo /US ton of feed showed similar performance levels than the positive control group supplemented with AGP.

Figure 1: Dose-dependent effects of for coccidiosis vaccinated broilers



Study IV: Evaluation of the dose-dependent effects of Activo for laying hens

Animals: 40 hens; age: week 20 to 43

Feed: basal diet for laying hens

Treatments:

- No supplement (negative control)
- 100 mg of Activo/ kg of feed
- 250 mg of Activo/ kg of feed
- 500 mg of Activo/ kg of feed
- 5.000 mg of Activo/ kg of feed

Parameters: weight gain, feed intake, egg production, feed conversion ratio, health status

Duration: 168 days of feeding period

Results: The laying hens showed a higher laying rate when fed with a higher concentration of phytomolecules (Figure 2). Similarly improved results were observed for the feed efficiency. The more phytogetic premix added to their diet the better feed efficiency (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Dose-dependent effects of Activo on laying rate in laying hens

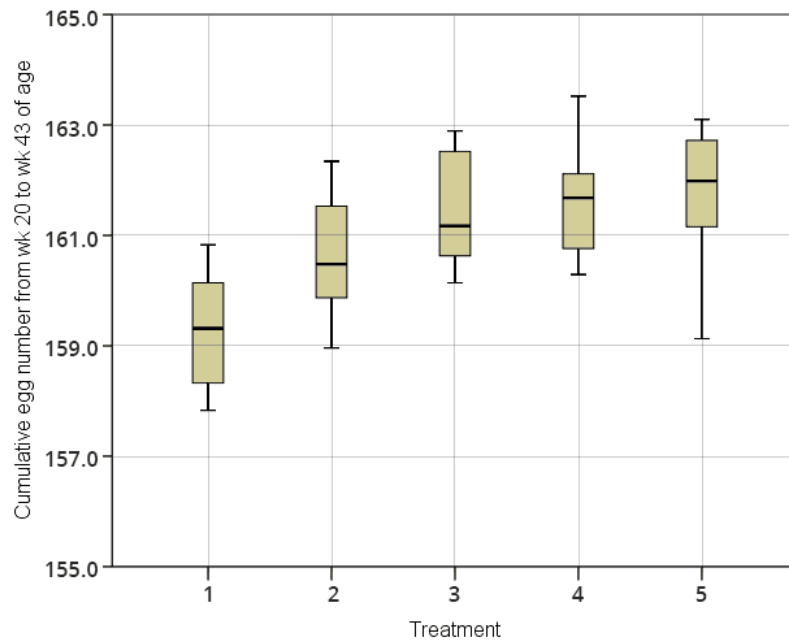
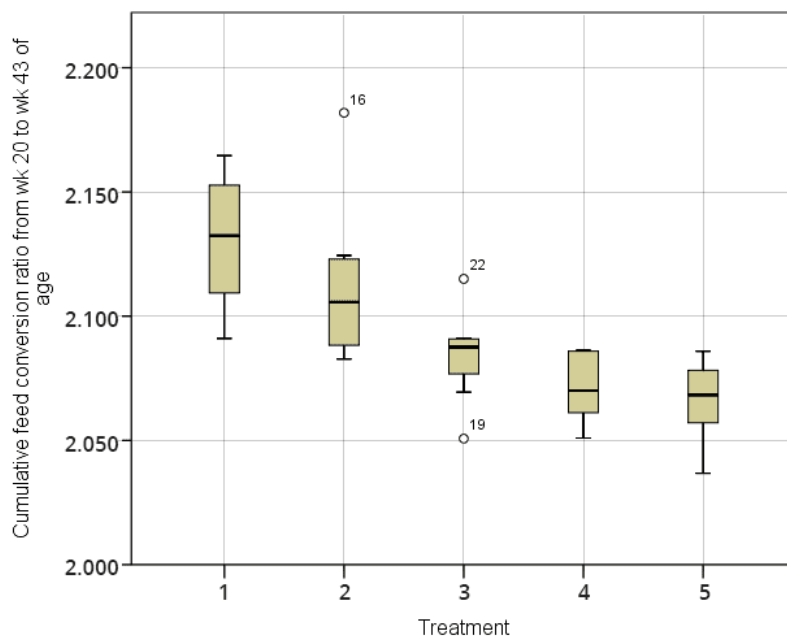


Figure 3: Dose-dependent effects of Activo on feed efficiency in laying hens



In conclusion, all four studies indicate that the inclusion of phytochemicals in broilers' and laying hens' diet improves their performance. Increasing levels of a phytochemical premix (Activo) significantly increased the production parameters for both groups. These improvements might bring performance in antibiotic-free [poultry production](#) on par with previous performance figures achieved with antimicrobial growth promoters.

The studies also showed that microencapsulated phytochemical premixes are safe when used in dose ranges recommended by the suppliers. No negative effects on animal health could be observed even at a 100 fold / 50 fold of the recommended inclusion rate in diets for broiler or laying hens, respectively. Thanks to their positive influence on intestinal health, phytochemicals thus boost poultry performance in a safe and effective way.

By Technical Team, EW Nutrition

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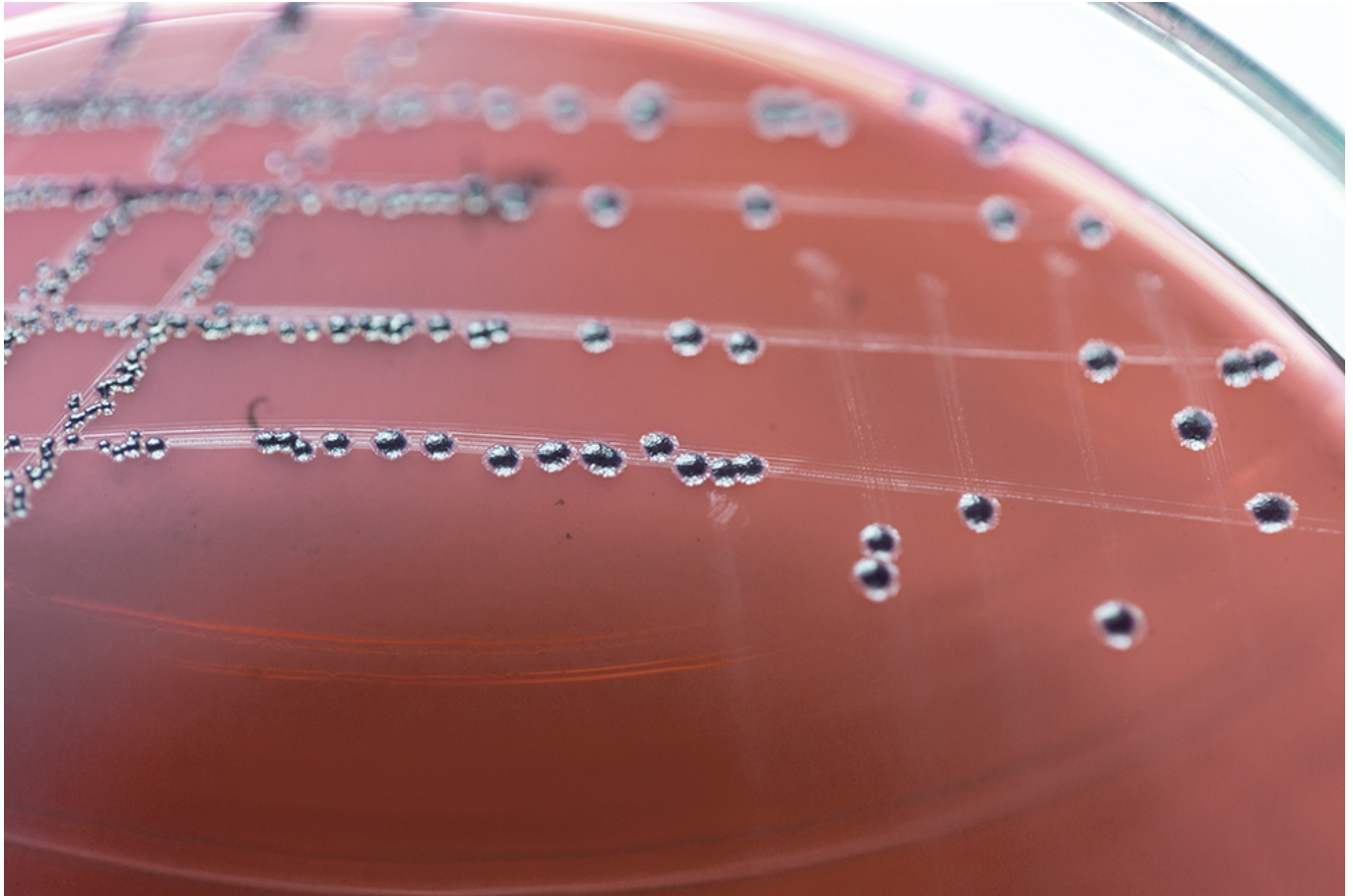
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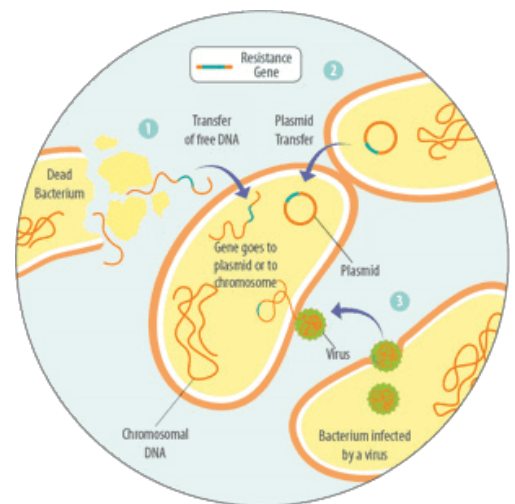
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Secondary Plant Compounds (SPC's) to reduce the use of antibiotics?



Initial in vitro trials give reason for hope

Antibiotic Resistance



Some bacteria, due to mutations, are less sensitive to certain antibiotics than others. This means that if certain antibiotics are used, the insensitive ones survive. Because their competitors have been eliminated, they are able to reproduce better. This resistance can be transferred to daughter cells by means of „resistance genes“. Other possibilities are the intake of free DNA and therefore these resistance genes from dead bacteria 1, through a transfer of these resistance genes by viruses 2 or from other bacteria by means of horizontal gene transfer 3 (see figure 1). Every application of antibiotics causes a selection of resistant bacteria. A short-term use or an application at a low dosage will give the bacteria a better chance to adapt, promoting the generation of resistance (Levy, 1998).

Antibiotics are promoting the development of resistance:

- Pathogenic bacteria possessing resistance genes are conserved and competitors that do not

- possess these genes are killed
- Useful bacteria possessing the resistance genes are conserved and serve as a gene pool of antibiotic resistance for others
- Useful bacteria without resistance, which probably could keep the pathogens under control, are killed

Reducing the use of antibiotics

	Activo Liquid		
Central Poultry Diagnostic Laboratory, Kondapur, Hyderabad (India)	10%	2%	1%
<i>E. coli</i> (reference strains)	++	+	+
<i>Proteus vulgaris</i> (reference strains)	+	+	+
<i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i>	++	+	-
<i>Salmonella pulmorum</i>	++	++	+
<i>Salmonella gallinarum</i>	++	++	+
<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i> (reference strains)	+++	++	++
- no effect + growth <u>inhibiting</u> ++ bactericidal			

Table 1: Effect of Activo Liquid against standard pathogens

Ingredients from herbs and spices have been used for centuries in human medicine and are now also used in modern animal husbandry. Many SPC's have antimicrobial characteristics, e.g. Carvacrol and Cinnamon aldehyde. They effectively act against *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, Enter- and *Staphylococcus*, and *Candida albicans*. Some compounds influence digestion, others act as antioxidants. Comprehensive knowledge about the single ingredients, their possible negative but also positive interaction (synergies) is essential for developing solutions. Granulated or microencapsulated products are suitable for addition to feed, liquid products would be more appropriate for an immediate application in the waterline in acute situations.

SPC's (Activo Liquid) against livestock pathogens in vitro

In "agar diffusion tests", the sensitivity of different strains of farm-specific pathogens was evaluated with different concentrations of Activo Liquid. The effectiveness was determined by the extent to which they prevented the development of bacterial overgrowth. The larger the bacteria-free zone, the higher the antimicrobial effect.

In this trial, Activo Liquid showed an antimicrobial effect on all bacteria tested. The degree of growth inhibition positively correlated with its concentration.

Table 1: Inhibition of field isolated standard pathogens by different concentrations of Activo Liquid

Activo Liquid against antibiotic resistant field pathogens in vitro

	Activo Liquid			
Laboratory: <u>Vaxxinova</u> , Münster, Germany	0.1%	0.2%	0.4%	1%
<u>E.coli</u> Reference ATCC25922	+	++	++	++
ESBL 1 (Pig)	-	++	++	++
ESBL 2 (Pig)	±	++	++	++
ESBL 3 (Poultry)	±	++	++	++
ESBL 4 (Poultry)	-	++	++	++
<u>S. aureus</u> Referenz ATCC29213	-	+	++	++
MRSA 1 (Pig)	-	+	++	++
MRSA 2 (Pig)	-	+	+	++
- <u>no effect</u> + <u>growth inhibiting</u> <u>± bacteriostatic</u> ++ <u>bactericidal</u>				

Table 2: Effect of Activo Liquid against field-isolated standard pathogens

It cannot be excluded that resistant pathogens not only acquired effective weapons to render antibiotics harmless to them but also developed general mechanisms to rid themselves of otherwise harmful substances. In a follow-up laboratory trial, we evaluated whether the Activo Liquid composition is as effective against ESBL producing *E. coli* and Methicillin resistant *S. aureus* (MRSA) as to non-resistant members of the same species.

Trial Design: Farm isolates of four ESBL producing *E. coli* and two MRSA strains were compared to nonresistant reference strains of the same species with respect to their sensitivity against Activo Liquid. In a Minimal Inhibitory Concentration Assay (MIC) under approved experimental conditions (Vaxxinova Diagnostic, Muenster, Germany) the antimicrobial efficacy of Activo Liquid in different concentrations was evaluated.

The efficacy of SPC's (Activo Liquid) against the tested strains could be demonstrated in a concentration-dependent manner with antimicrobial impact at higher concentrations and bacteriostatic efficacy in dilutions up to 0,1% (ESBL) and 0,2% (MRSA)(table 2).

Conclusion:

To contain the emergence and spread of newly formed resistance mechanisms it is of vital importance to reduce the use of antibiotics. SPC's are a possibility to [decrease antibiotic use](#) especially in pro- and metaphylaxis, as [they show good efficacy against the common pathogens](#) found in poultry, even against resistant ones.

I. Heinzl

Necrotic enteritis in poultry



Enteric diseases cause significant economic losses due to decreased weight gain, higher mortality, higher feed conversion, higher veterinary costs and medicine and a higher risk of contamination by poultry products in food production. The losses due to necrotic enteritis mainly occurring in broilers and fattening turkeys in intensive floor or free-range management are put at 2 billion US\$ per year.

After the ban of antibiotic growth promoters, the relevance of this formerly well controllable disease reappeared and increased.

Necrotic enteritis is a disease of the gut

It is caused by specific gram-positive, anaerobic bacteria – *Clostridium perfringens*, mostly Type A. Clostridia are found in litter, faeces, soil, dust and in healthy animals' guts. These spore forming bacteria are extremely resistant against environmental influences and can survive in soil, feed, and litter for several years and even reproduce.

Clostridium perfringens is a component of the normal gut flora. It occurs in a mixture of diverse strains in a concentration of up to 10^5 CFU / g intestinal content. In animals suffering from necrotic enteritis particularly one strain of *Clostridium perfringens* is found in a much more higher concentration of 10^6 - 10^8 CFU / g.

Necrotic enteritis affects chickens and turkeys at the age of 2-16 weeks, proliferating at the age of 3-6 weeks. There is an acute clinical, and a subclinical form.

Birds suffering from the clinical form clearly show symptoms like a poor general state of health and diarrhoea. Mortality rates up to 50 % can occur. Subclinical necrotic enteritis cannot be diagnosed easily, as there are no clear symptoms. This form, however, stays within the flock and causes losses due to decreased growth.

Factors promoting an infection with necrotic enteritis should be avoided!

In general, factors have to be cited that create an intestinal environment favourable for the facultative anaerobic *Clostridium perfringens* or weaken the immune status of the host:

1. **Feed:**

Here **NSP's** have to be mentioned. Undigested NSP's serve as substrate and some of them cause higher production of mucus also serving as substrate and providing ideal anaerobic conditions. Undigested **proteins** due to high contents in the diet also serve as substrates. **Animal protein** and **fat** are worse than vegetable variants and a homogeneous size of particles in the diet is better than an **inhomogeneous mixture**.

2. **Stress**

Stresses such as feed change or high stocking density favour NE

3. **Diseases**

Immunosuppressive diseases such as infective chicken anaemia, Gumboro or Marek's decrease resistance against intestinal infections and facilitate their colonisation. Some pathogens exert pressure on the gut and prepare the way for clostridia. Here Cryptosporidia and salmonella have to be mentioned.

New approaches

[Secondary plant compounds](#) show good results against the two microorganisms just mentioned. In a trial conducted with free range broilers in France, a combination of a vaccination against coccidia and a mixture of secondary plant compounds (Activo liquid) resulted in a reduced occurrence of necrotic enteritis in the trial group compared to the control. Additionally due to an improved feed conversion, the margin per animal in the trial group was 5 Cent higher than in the control (1,44 € vs 1,39 €).

In an *in vitro* test, [Activo liquid](#) also showed bactericidal efficacy against field isolated *Salmonella pulmorum* and *Salmonella gallinarum* at a 2 % concentration.

The trials show that combined with a good feeding and stress management, secondary plant compounds, could be a [good tool to eliminate predisposing factors for necrotic enteritis](#) and could therefore help control this economically important disease.

Secondary plant compounds are the new frontier in poultry nutrition



Why should you read another story about phytochemicals? Or, is it botanicals, spices, herbs, and extracts? No matter what we call them, scientists have named them "[secondary plant compounds](#)", and if we are to follow the American tradition we can call them SPC. Then, here is the first interesting thing we can discuss about this plant-derived class of active compounds. They are "secondary" in nature, but not insignificant. They play no role in normal metabolism, but they help plants (and now animals) survive under adverse conditions. Perhaps, this is why some experts consider them as the next frontier in poultry nutrition. With [poultry](#) that are raised in less than ideal conditions, especially when we consider the movement towards antibiotic reduction (for growth promoting reasons, not complete removal of all medicines), we understand that such natural compounds can be of significant help.

As it happens, the majority of poultry specialists in Europe and increasingly in the Americas consider SPC as an almost-essential element in diets for broilers and layers (and turkeys, ducks, and all poultry for that matter) when birds are raised without antibiotics. Some go even further and use them along with antibiotics because, as we all know, antibiotics are never 100% efficient as bacteria sooner or later develop some form of resistance. Such resistance has not yet been observed with SPC. So if one is to use SPC in poultry feeds, which ones to buy? A quick glance at the market will reveal more commercial products than can possibly be imagined. Some must be better than the rest, but how can we separate the wheat from the chaff? Price alone is not always a good indicator. A high quality product must be expensive – for there is no such thing as a free lunch – but all expensive products are not always of the highest possible quality!

There are three basic criteria, which we can mention briefly here:

1. **SPC are volatile** – at least most of them. As such, unprotected products will soon evaporate if left in the open air as it happens with feed prepared in commercial farms. So, some form of protecting SPC is essential.
2. **SPC are innumerable** – so finding the right mix for the job required is important. You cannot get the same results with any kind of mix. So, in designing an SPC mix, the manufacturer must declare and have knowledge of the target to be accomplished.
3. **SPC are powerful** – meaning you cannot just keep adding as much as possible. Here finding the exact dosage for the right purpose is a difficult balancing exercise. So, the right mix and the right dosage must be combined, otherwise animals will refuse the feed (worst case scenario) or just fail to benefit from SPC inclusion.

There is so much more to learn about this exciting class of compounds that can replace the growth promoting action of antibiotics that it is worth spending time learning more about them.