A risk modelling approach for setting microbiological limits using enterococci as indicator for growth potential of Salmonella in pork

Microbiological limits are widely used in food processing as an aid to reduce the exposure to hazardous microorganisms for the consumers. However, in pork, the prevalence and concentrations of Salmonella are generally low and microbiological limits are not considered an efficient tool to support hygiene interventions. The objective of the present study was to develop an approach which could make it possible to define potential risk-based microbiological limits for an indicator, enterococci, in order to evaluate the risk from potential growth of Salmonella. A positive correlation between the concentration of enterococci and the prevalence and concentration of Salmonella was shown for 6640 pork samples taken at Danish cutting plants and retail butchers. The samples were collected in five different studies in 2001, 2002, 2010, 2011 and 2013. The observations that both Salmonella and enterococci are carried in the intestinal tract, contaminate pork by the same mechanisms and share similar growth characteristics (lag phase and maximum specific growth rate) at temperatures around 5-10 °C, suggest a potential of enterococci to be used as an indicator of potential growth of Salmonella in pork. Elevated temperatures during processing will lead to growth of both enterococci and, if present, also Salmonella. By combining the correlation between enterococci and Salmonella with risk modelling, it is possible to predict the risk of salmonellosis based on the level of enterococci. The risk model used for this purpose includes the dose-response relationship for Salmonella and a reduction factor to account for preparation of the fresh pork. By use of the risk model, it was estimated that the majority of salmonellosis cases, caused by the consumption of pork in Denmark, is caused by the small fraction of pork products that has enterococci concentrations above 5 log. CFU/g. This illustrates that our approach can be used to evaluate the potential effect of different microbiological limits and therefore, the perspective of this novel approach is that it can be used for definition of a risk-based microbiological limit for enterococci. The limit for enterococci can then be used for development of a process hygiene criterion in cutting plants and retail butcher shops, with the purpose of reducing the risk of Salmonella for the consumer.