

03H – Heat Treated But Not Fully Cooked - Not Shelf Stable (NRTE)

The products included in this category vary quite a bit from each other. What they have in common is that they have received some type of heat treatment, but not sufficient heat treatment to result in ready-to-eat product. The finished products in this category are not shelf stable products and require special handling to maintain their wholesome condition, i.e., labeling that states the product must be kept refrigerated or kept frozen (9 CFR §317.2(k) or §381.125(a)). These products also require safe handling instructions (9 CFR §317.2(l) and §381.125(b)). Some finished products in this processing category may be prepared with both meat/poultry components that have received a lethality treatment in combination with non-meat/poultry components that need to receive a lethality treatment. These multi-component products, e.g., meals, dinners, and entrees, have labeling features which are conspicuous so that intended users are fully aware that the product must be cooked for safety. The principle display panel on the label will define these products, e.g., “Cook and Serve,” “Must be thoroughly cooked,” “Cook before eating”, and the product will have cooking instructions. Some examples of finished products produced under this process category that may fall under the ISP 03H Element include: bacon, char-marked patties, partially cooked nuggets, frozen entrees or dinners, and low temperature rendered products. In the case of bacon, the heat is used to aid the smoking and curing process. For the char-marked patties, the heat is applied to sear grill marks on the meat, but is not meant to cook the product. Nuggets are partially cooked to help set the breading and give it a more appealing color. All of these products must be thoroughly cooked before consumption.

One of the key elements in determining if an establishment is producing products that fall under the regulatory 03H processing category is the finished product label. However, product standards, processing methods, as well as labeling are all factors that must be considered in determining the regulatory processing category for 03H NRTE products. Finished products in this category would not have received heat in combination with other treatments that change the product characteristics to promote microbial inhibiting qualities that are enhanced by antimicrobial agents, acidulants, salt, etc.