Vol. 2 No. 4 (2025)

ONLINE ISSN :3007-309X
PRINT ISSN :3007-3081

Journal of Medical & Health Sciences Review

EMERGING MEAT PROCESSING TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE SAFETY AND QUALITY OF MEAT PRODUCTS

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ARTICLE INFO:

Keywords: Meat rocessing Technologies; Meat Safety; Meat Quality; Traditional Vs Emerging Technologies; High Pressure Processing; Pulsed Electric Field

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Article History:
Published on December 22, 2025

ABSTRACT

Meat processing technologies play a critical role in ensuring the safety, quality and shelf-life of meat products. Traditional processing methods, including chilling, freezing, curing, smoking and thermal treatments have long been employed to reduce microbial contamination and extend storage life. However, these methods can adversely affect the sensory attributes and nutritional quality of meat. Emerging technologies such as high pressure processing (HPP), pulsed electric fields (PEF), ultrasonication, irradiation, cold plasma and ohmic heating, offer innovative approaches that can enhance microbial safety while better preserving meat quality. This review provides a comprehensive comparison of traditional and modern meat processing techniques, evaluating their effects on microbial inactivation, shelf-life extension, sensory characteristics and nutritional retention. Additionally, the review discusses the regulatory frameworks, industrial adoption challenges and future research trends associated with these technologies. By highlighting the strengths and limitations of both traditional and emerging approaches, this review aims to inform researchers, industry professionals and policymakers about optimal strategies for producing safe and high quality meat products.

INTRODUCTION

Meat is a major source of high quality protein, essential amino acids, vitamins and minerals in human diets, contributing significantly to global nutrition and food security [1]. However, meat is also highly perishable and prone to microbial contamination, spoilage and quality

deterioration due to its high moisture content, neutral pH and nutrient richness, which provide an ideal environment for microbial growth [2]. Consequently, effective processing techniques are essential to ensure the safety, shelf-life and sensory quality of meat products.

Traditionally, meat processing has relied on chilling, freezing, curing, smoking and thermal treatments to reduce microbial loads and extend storage life [3]. While these methods have been effective in controlling pathogens such as *Salmonella*, *Listeria monocytogenes* and *Escherichia coli*, they are associated with several limitations. Conventional thermal treatments, for example, can lead to protein denaturation, moisture loss, textural changes and nutrient degradation, which negatively affect the sensory and nutritional quality of meat [4,5]. Additionally, traditional methods may not fully inactivate heat resistant pathogens or eliminate spoilage microorganisms, potentially compromising food safety [6].

In response to these challenges, a range of emerging meat processing technologies has been developed. High-pressure processing (HPP), pulsed electric fields (PEF), ultrasonication, cold plasma, irradiation and ohmic heating have shown promise in enhancing microbial inactivation while preserving the physicochemical and sensory attributes of meat [7-10]. These technologies often allow non-thermal or mild thermal processing, minimizing the negative effects on flavor, texture and nutritional content. For instance, HPP has been reported to inactivate pathogenic microorganisms without significant protein denaturation whereas PEF can improve tenderness and water holding capacity [11,12].

Given the increasing demand for safe, high-quality and minimally processed meat products, a comparative understanding of traditional and emerging technologies is crucial. This review aims to critically evaluate the impact of both traditional and modern meat processing methods on meat safety and quality, highlighting their advantages, limitations and potential for industrial application. Furthermore, regulatory considerations, consumer acceptance and future research directions are discussed to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state and trends in meat processing technologies.

Traditional Meat Processing Methods

Traditional meat processing techniques have been employed for centuries to enhance safety, prolong shelf-life and maintain product quality**.** These methods primarily include chilling, freezing, curing, smoking and thermal processing**.** Each technique influences meat safety and quality differently with distinct advantages and limitations.

1. Chilling and Refrigeration

Chilling, or storing meat at low temperatures (0-4°C), slows microbial growth and enzymatic activity, thereby prolonging shelf-life and preserving sensory attributes [1]. Refrigeration effectively reduces the proliferation of spoilage organisms such as *Pseudomonas* spp. and *Lactobacillus* spp. and can moderately control pathogens like *Salmonella* and *Listeria monocytogenes* [2]. However, chilling does not inactivate pathogens completely, and prolonged storage may allow psychrotrophic bacteria to grow, leading to spoilage [3].

2. Freezing

Freezing meat at temperatures below 18°C halts microbial activity and preserves meat for extended periods [4]. While effective in microbial control**,** freezing can affect texture and water holding capacity due to ice crystal formation, which may damage muscle fibers [5]. Rapid freezing methods such as cryogenic freezing, minimize these quality losses compared to slow freezing [6].

3. Curing

Curing involves the addition of salt, nitrites, nitrates, or combinations thereof to inhibit microbial growth and enhance flavor and color [7]. Nitrites, in particular, prevent the growth of *Clostridium botulinum* and contribute to the characteristic pink color of cured meats [8]. Despite these benefits,

excessive nitrite usage can form potentially harmful nitrosamines, raising safety concerns [9].

4. Smoking

Smoking exposes meat to smoke from burning wood, providing flavor, color and antimicrobial protection [10]. Phenolic compounds and other chemicals in smoke inhibit microbial growth and oxidative rancidity [11]. Traditional smoking can, however, generate polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are associated with carcinogenic risks [12].

5. Thermal Processing (Cooking and Pasteurization)

Thermal methods, including cooking, steaming and pasteurization, are widely used to inactivate pathogens and extend shelf-life [13]. While highly effective for microbial safety, thermal processing can cause protein denaturation, moisture loss and reduced nutritional value, particularly of heat sensitive vitamins [14]. Additionally, overcooking may negatively affect texture, flavor and color reducing consumer acceptance [15].

Summary of Traditional Methods

Traditional meat processing techniques remain essential in the meat industry due to their proven effectiveness and low cost. However, each method presents trade-offs between safety and quality often compromising sensory or nutritional attributes. These limitations have prompted the development of emerging non-thermal technologies that aim to achieve superior microbial inactivation while preserving meat quality. The following sections will explore these modern techniques and their comparative advantages.

Emerging Meat Processing Technologies

Recent advances in food processing have led to the development of emerging meat processing technologies aimed at enhancing microbial safety while preserving sensory and nutritional quality. Unlike conventional methods, these technologies often involve non-thermal or mild-thermal approaches, minimizing negative effects on meat texture, color and flavor. Major emerging technologies include high-pressure processing (HPP), pulsed electric fields (PEF), ultrasonication, cold plasma, irradiation and ohmic heating.

1. High-Pressure Processing (HPP)

HPP involves subjecting meat to extremely high pressures (300–600 MPa) for a short duration, which inactivates pathogenic and spoilage microorganisms without significant heat application [1]. HPP preserves the natural color, flavour and nutritional content of meat more effectively than traditional thermal processing [2]. Studies have reported reductions in *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Salmonella* and *E. coli* in meat products, while maintaining tenderness and water holding capacity [3,4]. HPP is particularly useful for ready-to-eat and minimally processed meat products, where microbial safety and quality are both priorities.

2. Pulsed Electric Fields (PEF)

PEF processing exposes meat to short bursts of high-voltage electric pulses, causing cell membrane permeabilization and microbial inactivation [5]. Unlike heat based methods, PEF minimally affects meat structure, texture, and nutrients. Research indicates that PEF can enhance tenderness and water retention in meat, while effectively reducing microbial load [6]. Its application is particularly promising for liquid or semi-solid meat products, such as minced meat or meat emulsions.

3. Ultrasonication

Ultrasonication employs high-frequency sound waves to induce cavitation in meat tissues, disrupting microbial cells and enhancing mass transfer processes such as curing or marination [7]. This method can improve tenderness, flavor absorption and salt penetration, while also reducing microbial counts [8]. Ultrasonication is increasingly being combined with other non-thermal technologies for synergistic effects on safety and quality.

4. Cold Plasma

Cold plasma generates reactive species at low temperatures that interact with microbial cell membranes, leading to

effective inactivation of pathogens [9]. Cold plasma treatments are particularly attractive for surface decontamination of meat products without causing thermal damage or loss of nutrients [10]. The technology is still emerging but shows promise for both safety enhancement and shelf-life extension.

5. Irradiation

Irradiation exposes meat to ionizing radiation, such as gamma rays, X-rays, or electron beams, to inactivate microorganisms and extend shelf-life [11]. The process is highly effective against bacteria, parasites and insects and can reduce spoilage without significant heat [12]. While irradiation preserves nutritional and sensory properties better than traditional thermal processing, consumer acceptance and regulatory restrictions in some regions limit its widespread adoption [13].

6. Ohmic Heating

Ohmic heating involves passing an electric current through meat, generating internal heat rapidly and uniformly [14]. This method provides efficient microbial inactivation and minimizes overcooking, thus preserving texture, flavour and nutrients [15]. Ohmic heating can be combined with other preservation strategies, such as vacuum packaging, for enhanced safety and quality.

Advantages Over Traditional Methods

Compared to conventional processing, emerging technologies offer:

- Better preservation of sensory and nutritional attributes
- Efficient microbial inactivation without prolonged high temperatures
- Potential for minimally processed and ready-to-eat products
- Synergistic use in combination with traditional methods to optimize safety and quality

Despite these advantages, challenges such as high equipment costs, scalability and regulatory acceptance need to be addressed before widespread industrial adoption [16].

Comparative Analysis: Safety and Quality

A direct comparison between traditional and emerging meat processing technologies highlights differences in microbial safety, shelf-life extension, sensory attributes and nutritional retention. Understanding these differences is essential for selecting the most appropriate processing method for specific meat products.

1. Microbial Safety

Traditional methods such as chilling, freezing, curing, smoking and thermal processing are effective in reducing microbial loads and controlling common pathogens like *Salmonella*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, and *Escherichia coli* [1–3]. Thermal treatments, in particular, ensure high microbial inactivation but may compromise quality.

Emerging technologies, including HPP, PEF, cold plasma, ultrasonication, irradiation and ohmic heating, achieve comparable or superior microbial reductions often without high temperatures [4-6]. HPP and irradiation, for example, can inactivate pathogens throughout the product, while cold plasma is particularly effective for surface decontamination. PEF and ultrasonication offer targeted microbial inactivation in semi-solid products without altering the overall structure [7,8]. Overall, emerging technologies can provide high safety assurance while minimizing quality loss, unlike some traditional thermal methods.

2. Shelf-Life Extension

Traditional methods extend shelf-life primarily by reducing microbial growth and slowing enzymatic reactions. Refrigeration and freezing prolong storage but are limited by psychrotrophic microbial growth or freezer burn, while curing and smoking add chemical preservatives but may pose health concerns [9-11].

Emerging technologies often enhance shelf-life more effectively without introducing additional chemicals. For instance, HPP-treated meat can have a shelf-life extension of 2-3 times that of chilled meat while retaining original color and texture [12]. Irradiation and cold plasma also contribute to longer shelf stability, particularly when

combined with modified atmosphere packaging [13].

3. Sensory Attributes and Quality

Traditional thermal methods can lead to protein denaturation, moisture loss and textural changes**,** negatively impacting consumer acceptance [14]. Curing and smoking improve flavour but may result in high salt content or formation of harmful compounds such as nitrosamines and PAHs [15].

Emerging technologies are designed to minimize these adverse effects. HPP and PEF preserve colour, tenderness, and nutritional content, while ultrasonication enhances marination and texture [16,17]. Cold plasma and irradiation maintain **nutritional quality** with minimal impact on sensory attributes, though some slight off flavours may occur depending on treatment intensity [18]. Overall emerging technologies offer a better balance between safety and product quality**.**

4. Trade-Offs and Consumer Acceptance

While emerging technologies provide clear advantages, high equipment costs, scalability issues, and consumer perception remain challenges [19]. Traditional methods, although sometimes compromising quality are widely accepted due to familiarity and low cost**.** Therefore, an integrated approach**,** combining traditional and emerging methods (e.g., mild thermal processing with HPP or ultrasonication), can optimize both safety and quality while remaining commercially viable.

Summary

- **Traditional methods:** Proven safety, low cost, limited impact on flavor for certain products, but potential quality loss and chemical concerns.
- **Emerging methods:** Superior safety and quality retention, minimal nutrient and sensory loss, but higher costs and adoption barriers.
- **Recommendation:** Combining methods or selectively applying emerging technologies can maximize microbial safety, shelf-life, and sensory quality aligning with modern consumer and regulatory demands.

Regulatory and Industrial Perspectives

The adoption of both traditional and emerging meat processing technologies is heavily influenced by regulatory frameworks, industry standards and economic considerations**.** Understanding these aspects is crucial for ensuring compliance, consumer safety and market acceptance**.**

1. Regulatory Frameworks

Meat processing is subject to strict food safety regulations worldwide. Traditional methods such as chilling, freezing, curing, and thermal processing are widely regulated under standards like Codex Alimentarius, European Union (EU) meat hygiene directives and U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations [1,2]. Emerging technologies, however, often require additional approval and validation due to their novelty.

For example, high-pressure processing (HPP) and irradiation are recognized by international authorities but require specific validation studies to demonstrate pathogen inactivation and shelf-life extension [3]. Cold plasma and PEF are still emerging and regulatory acceptance varies across countries, sometimes limiting commercial implementation [4]. Compliance with FSSC 22000, ISO 22000 and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP**)** frameworks is essential to ensure that both traditional and modern processing methods maintain food safety management standards [5].

2. Industrial Adoption Challenges

While emerging technologies offer clear benefits, industries face several barriers:

High capital costs: Equipment such as HPP systems and cold plasma units are expensive, often limiting adoption to large scale operations [6].

- **Technical expertise:** Specialized knowledge is required to operate and validate new technologies effectively [7].
- **Scalability:** Some non-thermal technologies may be more suited to small batches, creating challenges for mass production [8].

Conversely, traditional processing methods are cost-effective, easy to implement and widely understood, making them accessible to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) [9]. However, their limitations in quality retention and pathogen inactivation motivate gradual integration with emerging technologies.

3. Cost-Benefit Considerations

Industries must weigh initial investment costs against potential benefits such as longer shelf-life, improved product quality, reduced spoilage, and enhanced market competitiveness. For instance, HPP-treated ready to eat meat can justify higher costs through premium pricing and reduced product recalls [10]. Combining traditional and emerging technologies (e.g., mild thermal treatment with HPP) can provide a balanced approach, optimizing both cost efficiency and product safety.

4. Consumer Perception and Acceptance

Consumer awareness and acceptance play a pivotal role in the success of emerging technologies. While traditional methods are familiar and trusted, non-thermal technologies may face skepticism due to perceived artificiality or lack of familiarity [11]. Transparent labelling, education on safety benefits and sensory quality preservation are key strategies for promoting acceptance.

Summary

Regulatory compliance, cost, technical feasibility and consumer acceptance collectively shape the adoption of meat processing technologies. Traditional methods remain dominant due to proven safety and accessibility, whereas emerging technologies offer enhanced safety and quality, especially when integrated strategically. A clear understanding of regulatory requirements and industry challenges is essential for effective implementation and commercialization of modern meat processing techniques.

Future Trends and Research Gaps

The field of meat processing is rapidly evolving, driven by consumer demand for safe, high quality, minimally processed products and the need for sustainable industrial practices. Despite advances in emerging technologies, several trends and research gaps remain that warrant attention.

1. Integration of Emerging and Traditional Technologies

Future meat processing is likely to emphasize hybrid approaches, combining traditional methods with emerging technologies to optimize safety, quality and cost-effectiveness [1]. For example, mild thermal processing followed by high-pressure treatment can ensure microbial safety while preserving texture and nutrients. Research is needed to establish synergistic protocols that maximize both safety and sensory attributes.

2. Smart and Sustainable Processing

The adoption of digital technologies, automation and Internet of Things (IoT)-enabled monitoring is a growing trend in the meat industry [2]. Smart sensors can monitor temperature, pH and microbial activity in real time, allowing for more precise control of processing conditions. Additionally, sustainable processing approaches, including energy efficient technologies and waste minimization are increasingly prioritized to reduce environmental impact [3].

3. Novel Non-Thermal Technologies

While HPP, PEF, cold plasma, ultrasonication, irradiation and ohmic heating have demonstrated significant potential, further research is needed to optimize processing parameters, scalability and cost efficiency [4]. Emerging methods such as plasma activated water and pulsed light treatments show promise but require comprehensive studies on mechanisms of microbial inactivation, effects on quality and regulatory acceptance.

4. Consumer-Centric Research

Consumer perception remains a key determinant of market success. Future studies should focus on sensory evaluation, acceptance of minimally processed meat, and understanding attitudes toward novel processing technologies [5]. Transparent labelling, education campaigns and targeted

marketing strategies will be essential to bridge the gap between technological innovation and consumer trust [22].

5. Regulatory Harmonization

As emerging technologies expand globally, there is a pressing need for harmonized international regulatory frameworks. Research and policy development should aim to standardize safety validation protocols, risk assessment methodologies, and labelling requirements to facilitate broader adoption of innovative meat processing methods [6].

6. Research Gaps

Key areas requiring further investigation include:

- Long term effects of emerging technologies on nutritional and sensory quality
- Cost benefit analyses for small and medium sized enterprises
- Development of predictive models for microbial inactivation under combined processing conditions
- Exploration of novel, environmentally sustainable technologies

Summary

The future of meat processing lies in the integration of traditional and emerging technologies, underpinned by smart, sustainable and consumer oriented approaches. Addressing the existing research gaps will support the development of safe, high quality and market acceptable meat products, aligning with both industrial and regulatory expectations.

Conclusion

Meat processing technologies play a pivotal role in ensuring the safety, quality and shelf-life of meat products. Traditional methods, including chilling, freezing, curing, smoking and thermal processing, have long been employed due to their proven effectiveness, simplicity and cost efficiency. However, these approaches often compromise sensory attributes, nutritional quality, or leave residual microbial risks.

Emerging technologies such as high pressure processing (HPP), pulsed electric fields (PEF), ultrasonication, cold plasma, irradiation and ohmic heating offer significant advantages by enhancing microbial safety while better preserving texture, flavor and nutrients. Comparative analysis indicates that integrating emerging and traditional methods can optimize both food safety and quality, providing a practical and commercially viable solution.

Despite their potential, adoption of modern technologies faces challenges related to cost, scalability, regulatory approval and consumer perception. Future research should focus on developing hybrid processing approaches, sustainable and energy efficient solutions and predictive models for microbial control while also addressing consumer acceptance and regulatory harmonization.

Overall, this review highlights the critical balance between meat safety and quality and emphasizes the need for innovative, integrated and evidence based processing strategies. By adopting both traditional and emerging technologies thoughtfully, the meat industry can produce safe, high quality and market acceptable products, meeting both regulatory standards and consumer expectations.

Suggested Tables

Table 1: Traditional Meat Processing Methods

Method	Mechanism	Effect on Microbial Safety	Effect on Meat Quality	Advantages	Limitations
Chilling	Low temperature storage	Slows microbial growth	Preserves texture, limited effect on flavor	Low cost, widely used	Does not inactivate pathogens

Method	Mechanism	Effect on Microbial Safety	Effect on Meat Quality	Advantages	Limitations
					completely
Freezing	Storage below 18°C	Halts microbial activity	May affect texture due to ice crystals	Long term storage	Possible freezer burn, textural damage
Curing	Salt, nitrites, nitrates	Inhibits pathogens like *C. botulinum*	Adds flavor and color	Extends shelf-life	Health concerns (nitrosamines)
Smoking	Smoke compounds	Surface microbial inhibition	Flavor and color enhancement	Preserves meat, sensory appeal	PAHs formation, surface only
Thermal Processing	Cooking, pasteurization	Pathogen inactivation	Protein denaturation, moisture loss	Highly effective for safety	Sensory and nutritional loss

Table 2: Emerging Meat Processing Technologies

Technology	Mechanism	Effect on Microbial Safety	Effect on Meat Quality	Advantages	Limitations
High-Pressure Processing (HPP)	High pressure (300–600 MPa)	Inactivates pathogens and spoilage microbes	Maintains color, texture, nutrients	Non-thermal, preserves quality	High cost, scalability
Pulsed Electric Fields (PEF)	High voltage pulses	Disrupts microbial membranes	Improves tenderness, minimal nutrient loss	Rapid, non-thermal	Limited to semi-solid products
Ultrasonication	High frequency sound waves	Disrupts microbial cells	Enhances marination, tenderness	Can be combined with other methods	Effectiveness depends on matrix
Cold Plasma	Reactive species at low temperature	Surface microbial inactivation	Minimal impact on nutrients	Non-thermal, effective for surface	Still emerging, limited adoption
Irradiation	Ionizing radiation	Inactivates bacteria, parasites	Minimal nutrient loss	Extends shelf-life	Regulatory restrictions, consumer perception
Ohmic Heating	Electric current generates uniform heat	Pathogen inactivation	Preserves texture, reduces overcooking	Fast, uniform heating	Equipment cost, limited data

Table 3: (Optional): Comparison Between Traditional and Emerging Technologies

Parameter	Traditional Methods	Emerging Technologies
Microbial Safety	Moderate to high, depending on method	High, often superior to traditional
Shelf-Life	Moderate, limited by storage and chemical additives	Extended, often 2–3× longer
Nutritional Quality	May decrease due to heat or additives	Better preserved
Sensory Attributes	Variable, may be negatively affected	Better preserved
Cost	Low to moderate	High initial investment
Scalability	Easy, well-established	Some technologies still scaling up
Consumer Acceptance	High	Moderate, depends on awareness

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