
How's the beef?

The discovery of the first US case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, widely known as mad cow disease, has raised these questions, among others:

Is it safe to eat beef in the United States? The short answer is yes. Since the diagnosis of mad cow in Britain in 1986, 178,000 cows there have been stricken, and stock native to 15 other European nations has also been infected. Until the Washington State case Dec. 9, no cases had been found here.

Are some beef products safer than others? Perhaps. Infection has not been found in any muscle tissue or in milk, but because it is impossible to know where beef was ground, particularly careful eaters may want to avoid it. The same can be said for hot dogs, beef pate, and deli meats.

In what parts of the cow has the disease been found? Brain tissue, the spinal cord, bone marrow, the retina, parts of the intestines, and some nerve cells.

Does "organic" beef offer any safety? "USDA Organic" beef is certified to have been fed no animal byproducts, which is how the disease is transmitted.

Can't a cow contract the disease from another living cow? No. BSE is not spread via bacteria or virus but by an



AP PHOTO

A cow chows down at the Mabton, Wash., farm where the diseased cow was living before slaughter.

infectious protein known as a prion.

How do prions go from animal to animal? It used to be common practice to add rendered animal offal to animal

feed to make use of every livestock ounce. Britain has since barred meat-and-bone meal from being added to feed for all meat-producing animals.

What about in the United States? In 1997, the US Food and Drug Administration barred use of most mammalian protein in feed intended for cows and other cud-chewing animals.

It seems, then, that we got the remedy without the problem.

Could there be loopholes in the US prevention scheme? Yes, and not only because enforcement of the ban is said to have lagged. Though the offal can't be fed to cows, it is still legal to use it in feed for animals such as chickens and pigs. And offal from those animals can legally be fed to cows.

How do people get mad cow? They don't; only cattle are affected. Humans can, however, get a related degenerative neurological disease, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, by ingesting infected tissue. As of Dec. 1, 155 people have been stricken, the vast majority of them in Britain. The disease is always fatal.

SOURCES: Department of Agriculture; Food and Drug Administration; Wall Street Journal; Globe archives

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