

Q: How safe is U.S. beef?

A: The U.S. beef supply is extremely safe. While these cases of BSE have been detected in the United States, the U.S. government has moved rapidly to respond appropriately. BSE is first an animal disease issue. Eating beef has never been associated with human illness. Therefore, beef cuts such as steaks, roasts and ground beef and any beef used to make further processed products is safe to consume.

Only three older cows have tested positive for BSE in the U.S. since surveillance testing began in the early 1990's. More than 80 percent of the beef consumed in the U.S. is derived from young cattle less than 30 months of age.

Q: What causes cattle to develop BSE?

A: The exact origin of BSE is not yet fully understood, but the disease is spread from feeding infected rendered proteins from ruminants to other ruminants. The Food and Drug Administration banned that practice in 1997. The two cows detected with BSE in the U.S. were born before the feed ban went into effect in 1997. Nearly 100 million head of cattle reside in the U.S.

Q: Is BSE widespread in American cattle herds?

A: No. The United States employs a multi firewall strategy that includes import controls on meat and livestock; strict feed controls to prevent the spread of the disease; and careful surveillance of cattle herds for animals exhibiting signs of the disease. Since June 2004, USDA has tested nearly 800,000 high-risk cattle as part of an enhanced surveillance program. This level of testing is well beyond international requirements.

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A comprehensive risk analysis conducted by Harvard University in 2001 and 2003 concluded that given the preventive and control systems in place in the

U.S., "BSE is extremely unlikely to become established in the U.S."

Q: To be safe, should I limit my consumption of beef?

A: No. U.S. beef is safe. The BSE agent is found primarily in neurological tissues, such as brains and spinal cords of infected animals. These components of beef are designated Specific Risk Materials and are removed from the food supply.

Q: With so many cases of BSE detected in the United Kingdom, why did such a small percentage of people develop vCJD?

A: The exact level of exposure to the BSE agent needed to cause human illness is unknown. However, scientists believe that it is not easy to contract vCJD. In fact, the world's leading experts believe those who have developed vCJD probably have a certain genetic predisposition that is triggered by exposure to the BSE agent. In other words, the infective agent does not transmit easily in humans. In fact, while more than 190,000 cases of BSE have been diagnosed worldwide, about 200 cases of vCJD have been diagnosed – even when many people were exposed to the BSE agent.

Q: Are there beef products that I should avoid to reduce risk?

A: No changes in beef consumption are necessary, and consumers should continue to enjoy beef and beef products as part of their diet. The U.S. government mandates that all known potentially infectious materials, specified risk materials, be eliminated from the food supply.

Q: If U.S. beef is safe, why have our trading partners halted beef imports?

A: The cessation of trade with some nations is disappointing, but not entirely unexpected. Any time a case of BSE is detected in a foreign country, countries around the world have historically halted trade. This policy dates back to the early stages of the BSE epidemic in the United Kingdom, when little was known about how to contain and prevent BSE. Today, however, the situation is quite different and discussions are under way about harmonizing beef trade among nations that implement BSE prevention and control strategies.

Under international health standards set by the Office of International Epizootics (OIE), no nation should be prevented from exporting its beef due to BSE. However, the OIE does prescribe actions that should be taken based on the degree of risk in a given country. The United States has exceeded these standards many times over.

Q: Is BSE contagious? Could it spread to other cattle?

A: No. BSE is not a contagious disease, unlike the highly contagious foot-and-mouth disease that is caused by a virus. BSE is transmitted from animal to animal through the consumption of contaminated feedstuffs.

Q: The Food and Drug Administration has banned the addition of ruminant-derived proteins to cattle feed. Why not simply ban all added animal proteins from all livestock feed rations?

A: There is no scientific evidence that proteins derived from cattle — even if they were BSE-infected — pose a risk to poultry or pigs. From an animal nutrition standpoint, the additional nutrients found in meat and bone meal assist in balancing an animal's protein intake, since plant proteins from corn or

soybeans have some amino acid deficiencies for mammals and birds. These valuable protein sources are used in very small quantities, which resemble brown sugar, in many animal feeds.

In 2009, FDA will implement additional safeguards to prevent any ruminant proteins from becoming part of the ruminant feed chain. Specifically, FDA will prohibit brain and spinal cords from cattle 30 months or older to be processed for any animal food.

Q: How much animal-derived protein is usually added to livestock rations?

A: The added amount is small. For food animals it is about two or three percent of the total diet. Since 1997, FDA has prohibited the addition of any ruminant-derived meat and meal bone to cattle feed.

As with all feed ingredients used in raising livestock, dietary formulations are managed by animal nutritionists to develop the optimum diet using the most cost-effective ingredients, depending on the specific breed and on various seasonal and geographic variables.

Q: Some groups claim that meat derived from Advanced Meat Recovery (AMR) product is unsafe. What is AMR and is it safe?

A: AMR systems are machines that remove meat off hard-to-trim bones without crushing, grinding and pulverizing the bones. This highly sophisticated system helps harvest remaining beef without requiring repetitive hand trimming.

Specified risk materials (SRMs) are removed from carcasses during processing and before bones enter AMR systems. The presence of SRM in AMR product would make it adulterated and subject to recall.