



BSE

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or "BSE" is an animal disease that was first diagnosed in cattle in the United Kingdom in 1986. BSE, which is sometimes referred to as "Mad Cow Disease", results when a protein in a cow's brain becomes abnormally folded; these proteins are called prions. In cattle, these misshapen prions are concentrated largely in the brain and the spinal cord.

The original source of BSE infectivity has not been determined. BSE is not a contagious disease. Rather, BSE is spread to cattle through contaminated feed that contains the infective agent or prion. To date, BSE has been found in countries that include the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, Israel, Canada and the United States; 99 percent of cases have occurred in the UK.

BSE is an animal disease issue that concentrates in certain tissues termed "specified risk materials" or SRMs. In the United States, SRMs are removed from cattle before processing. This removal is done with continuous oversight from federal USDA inspectors, who are in meat packing plants during every minute of operation. Taking these careful steps to remove SRMs protects human health in the unlikely event that an animal that is processed is infected with BSE.

According to USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, the infective agent that causes BSE has not been detected in meat.

Both government agencies responsible for oversight of sectors of the food supply, U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration, have strengthened existing "firewalls" that help prevent BSE from spreading to cattle and that protect the public health. For example, since January 2004, non-ambulatory cattle (those unable to walk for any reason – even a broken ankle) may not enter the food supply. BSE surveillance was increased by USDA, to detect the prevalence of BSE in U.S. cattle. Since 2004 more than 388,000 cattle have been tested. This should assure the public that if the disease exists in U.S. cattle, it will be found with a high degree of statistical confidence.

BSE has been associated with a human illness known as variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD). According to CDC, approximately 156 vCJD cases have been diagnosed worldwide. Scientists believe that it is not easy to contract vCJD. Almost all cases of vCJD have occurred in the UK. It is likely that these cases resulted from massive exposure to the infectious agent when cattle brains were

routinely consumed in traditional British dishes early in the BSE epidemic, before the disease was fully understood. Today, many of the world's leading experts believe those who have developed vCJD probably have a certain genetic predisposition combined with exposure to the BSE agent.

According to Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns and other U.S. health officials, consumers need not change their diets or take any special actions when consuming beef.

For more information on BSE, click here or visit www.USDA.gov