

Questions and Answers

What is bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or “mad cow” disease?

Mad cow disease or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) is a progressive disorder of the brain and nervous system of cattle that is caused by an unusual infectious agent called a prion. BSE resembles a disease found in sheep that has been known for many decades.

The BSE epidemic among cattle started in the United Kingdom and peaked in January 1993. The outbreak may have resulted from feeding infected sheep meat-and-bone meal to cattle. There is strong evidence and general agreement that feeding rendered bovine meat-and-bone meal to young calves increased the spread of the outbreak in the United Kingdom.

Is BSE occurring in the United States?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has indicated that BSE had never been detected in the United States until December 2003 in Washington State, even though a close watch began for the disease in May 1990.

To prevent BSE from entering the United States, severe restrictions were placed in the 1990s on the importation of live cattle and sheep and certain animal products from countries where BSE was known to exist.

Is BSE a foodborne hazard in the United States?

Thus far only one cow was discovered to have BSE, so it is highly unlikely that BSE would be a foodborne hazard in this country. The US Department of Agriculture has recalled meat products from the plant where this diseased cow was detected.

Is it safe to eat beef now, including hamburger and steaks?

All potentially contaminated meat from the Washington slaughterhouse was recalled. It is very unlikely that any product was shipped to Southern California. The amount of potentially contaminated meat constitutes a tiny fraction of the tens of millions of pounds of meat eaten every day in the United States.

Is it safe to drink milk and eat other dairy products?

Milk and milk products from cows are not believed to pose any risk for transmitting the BSE agent. Experiments have shown that milk from BSE-infected cows has not caused infections in the cattle or in other test animals.

Is there any monitoring for cases of human Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in the United States?

Yes. The possibility that BSE can spread to humans has focused increased attention on national Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) surveillance. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) monitors trends and new cases of CJD in the United States by analyzing death certificate information compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics, CDC.

In 2002, CDC reported the occurrence of variant CJD in a 22-year-old Florida resident who was born in and grew up in the United Kingdom and thus had exposure to contaminated beef as a child. No other such cases have been detected. However, it is important to note that there have been no human cases of CJD due to the consumption of U.S. beef.