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HEALTH JOURNALBy TARA PARKER-
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Why Blaming Canada Isn't Enough: U.S. Mad-Cow Inspections Lack Teeth

News that a mad cow may actually be from Canada has the U.S. government and beef industry breathing a huge sigh of relief.

But for the American consumer, it may be the worst thing that could have happened.

The reason? If the industry and government can simply blame Canada for the problem, it will be far easier to resist making the changes needed to bring U.S. testing and safety standards up to the rules adopted by other countries. And it will be that much longer before consumers can truly feel confident in the safety of the U.S. beef supply when it comes to preventing bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE.

MAD COW HITS THE U.S.



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See [full coverage](#)² of the first case of mad-cow disease in the U.S.

And this isn't a disease where we should be taking chances. It kills cows by boring holes in their brain and is

always fatal. The human form of mad cow, while much rarer, is also lethal and has afflicted more than 130 people in Great Britain.

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ABOUT TARA PARKER- POPE

Tara Parker-Pope writes Health Journal, a column devoted to exploring health issues that directly affect our readers' daily lives -- whether it's alerting them to a new surgical glue that can replace stitches or explaining how too much headache medicine can actually cause headaches. The goal of Health Journal is to arm consumers with information that will help them make informed choices about health and medicine.

Tara began writing Health Journal in January 2000. Before that, she spent five years as a consumer-products reporter, first for The Wall Street Journal Europe in London and most recently from the Journal's New York headquarters. Previously, she worked as a political and government reporter for the Houston Chronicle and Austin-American Statesman. She is a 1988 graduate of the University of Texas, where she majored in sociology.

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To be sure, the known risks of contracting the human form of mad cow appear to be exceedingly small. But so little is really known about the disease, the U.S. should follow the lead of other countries that have been far more aggressive in ensuring the safety of the beef supply.

Here's a look at some of the questionable practices of the U.S. meat industry:

Cows still eat the ground-up remains of other animals. It's clear that cows become infected with BSE by eating the recycled remains of other BSE-infected animals. As a result, Japan and Europe have banned the practice. But the U.S. feeding ban adopted in 1997 is far more limited, stating that ruminants can't be fed ground up parts of other ruminants -- cattle, sheep, goats and deer. But chickens and pigs still eat ground-up cows. And cows still eat ground-up chicken and pigs. So it's possible that a BSE cow could be fed to a pig or chicken that is, in turn, fed back to other cows, that are eventually eaten by people. "U.S. measures to prevent the tissue of cattle infected with the agent of BSE from entering the food chain are not foolproof," states a Nov. 17 report from the Institute of Medicine that urges more funding and study of prion diseases like BSE.

Bovine blood products are fed to calves. While cows aren't allowed to directly eat cow parts any more, calves are still fed bovine blood products. It's an odd exception because scientists believe that prion diseases can be transmitted through the blood.



Richard B. Levine/NewsCom

The first case of **BSE** in the U.S. leaves consumers in a quandary.

That's why the Red Cross no longer accepts blood donations from people who lived in Britain for three months or Europe for six months from 1980 to the present for fear they might have been exposed to BSE-infected beef while living there.

Few animals are tested for BSE. While the beef industry hails the discovery of the mad cow in Washington state as a sign that the system is working, most critics say it was just dumb luck that the animal was found at all. The U.S. tests an embarrassingly small number of animals compared to other countries. In 2002, 19,990 cattle brains were tested for BSE and 11,152 were tested during the first four months of 2003. But that's just a fraction of the 35 million killed for slaughter in the U.S. each year. In Europe, about 200,000 animals are tested each day and in Japan, every bovine that enters the food supply is tested.

Sick cows are part of the U.S. food supply. Like the Washington Holstein with BSE, an estimated 200,000 to as many as one million cows each year are considered "downer" animals because they are

unable to walk into slaughterhouses. But they can still be killed and packaged for consumers to eat anyway. Other countries don't allow consumers to eat downer animals, but this summer, Congress failed to pass a bill that would have banned downer cows from entering the food supply. It's worth noting that McDonald's, Wendy's and Burger King don't use downer meat in their restaurants.

Beef producers say many of the concerns are unfounded because the steps the U.S. has already taken have resulted in an adequate "firewall" to keep the beef supply safe without placing onerous and costly regulations on the low-margin beef industry. "The risk of BSE in the United States remains very low in the sense that this animal was not infected here," says Gary Weber, executive director of regulatory affairs for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. "We don't have circulating infectivity in our feed."

But critics say the U.S. BSE-testing program is so weak, it was seemingly designed not to find mad-cow disease rather than to detect it. "We're still engaged in these dangerous feed practices, and we have inadequate testing," says John Stauber, co-author of *Mad Cow USA* and a long-time critic of the beef industry. "The longer we delay biting the bullet and instituting the strict animal feed and testing regulations that are working in Europe, the worse and worse the problem is going to become."

So what can consumers do? Of course, the ultimate protection is to stop eating beef. But there are steps you can take short of that. Diners can choose certified organic or grass-fed beef. Whole boneless cuts of regular beef shouldn't be at risk, but that isn't certain. Avoid processed foods like hamburgers, hotdogs and sausage, and never eat brains. "You can eat meat -- just realize there is this hierarchy of risk," says Michael Hansen of the Consumers Union. "If you want hamburger, buy a piece of meat and watch them grind it yourself."

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