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Meat From Dying, Sick Or Diseased Cows Getting into Food

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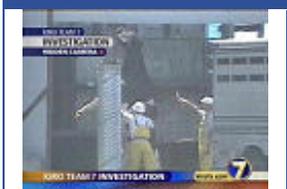
KIRO 7 Eyewitness News Investigative Reporter

A KIRO Team 7 Investigation discovers an explosive story about meat from dying, sick or diseased cows getting into your food.

Some images are exceptionally disturbing and may be upsetting, especially to children.

Investigative Reporter Chris Halsne spent six months under cover, exposing something the meat industry would rather keep secret from consumers.

Video



[Downer Cows Investigation, Part I](#)

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They're called "downers," getting that name because healthy cattle walk into the slaughterhouse but the "downers" are too ill or injured to do so.

Video shot by KIRO Team 7 Investigators raises serious questions about the quality or safety of this kind of beef.

We've seen a healthy cow, one you might expect to become steak some day.

Downers, however, are delivered by pick-up truck to slaughter horizontally, in a pile of manure. This meat gets to your dinner plate with the help of some hoisting and dragging.

Gaylis Linville wonders how downers can become food. She's a consumer expert of sorts when it comes to food safety. Her son, Max, nearly died from an E. coli-contaminated Jack in the Box hamburger.

She was surprised to learn from our videotape that sick, diseased, or injured



DOWNER COWS INVESTIGATION

[Meat From Dying, Sick Or Diseased Cows Getting into Food](#)

Aired Oct. 31, 2002, 5 p. m.

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dairy cattle still make their way into federally-inspected slaughterhouses.

"I don't understand how it can be accepted and ground up into the food supply. It seems like that type of animal should go to a rendering plant," Linville says.

The US Department of Agriculture labels downers "high-risk or suspect" but under proper inspection allows their use for hamburger, soups and hot dogs.

That's a dangerous practice, according to former USDA veterinarian Dr. Lester Friedlander. He trained federal meat inspectors for years, and has personally examined hundreds of thousands of downers.

"If it was up to me, I'd probably condemn all downers because I wouldn't want to take the chance of my family eating it," Dr. Friedlander says.

Federal law is clear: livestock found in a dying condition shall be condemned and disposed. Dr Friedlander says federal meat inspectors routinely ignore that segment of the food safety regulation under pressure from plant owners and the USDA.

That brings us back to our surveillance video. KIRO Team 7 Investigators recorded several hours worth of downer transactions at Midway Meats in Chehalis. A number of animals we saw enter the plant were too sick or injured to even stand up.

We asked Friedlander and another former USDA vet to review large portions of our unedited tape.

"After looking at a tape like this you ask 'Where do you think fecal contamination comes from? Is this a good source? Obviously, it is a good source, the main source.'"

Friedlander isn't offended by unconscious cows hanging by their necks, but is outraged he doesn't see white-coated federal meat inspectors doing their jobs. He says if the downers we videotaped were healthy enough to eat, the USDA inspector wouldn't know it.

Midway Meats says our videotape doesn't tell the whole story. Some cows may look lifeless, but that's because they were stunned with a captive bolt gun while inside the trailer, where we couldn't see.

Owners of the plant also say USDA vets examined the animals inside the trailers. Again, that's something we didn't see.

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Aired Oct. 31, 2002, 11 p. m.

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Aired Nov. 1, 2002, 11 p. m.

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Bill Sexsmith owns Midway Meats.

"I have every confidence in the world that the meat that goes through is absolutely safe," Sexsmith says.

He says USDA vets review all his downer business and do a good job at disqualifying diseased animals.

"It has to be done effectively or they'll tag us and we can't continue to operate."

Sexsmith says federal meat inspectors do a quick health check in his parking lot but normally retest downers inside the plant as well. Some national experts like Dr. Friedlander tell KIRO Team 7 Investigators the risks of processing downers at all are just too great.

"If you take care of the downers, you'd probably see a lower incidence of these outbreaks of E. Coli," Friedlander says.

Gaylis Linville, who watched her son suffer for three months from E. Coli, would love to see downer meat banned.

"There's not anything here to debate. Clearly it's a sick animal being dragged into a slaughterhouse and USDA inspectors are just turning the other cheek and letting this occur!" she says.

Midway Meats owner Bill Sexsmith says he's unaware of any consumer complaints regarding quality or safety of his products.

We repeatedly asked the USDA to comment on the apparent lack of proper outside inspection by their vets, but so far, nothing.

Congress recently banned the use of downer meat in the federal school lunch program. However, there is no current requirement for meat processors inform consumers about downer meat or label packages that may contain it.

If you want to comment on the use of downers to Congressional members on the Agriculture Committee, send them an email.

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