

Don't Have a Cow Over Mad Cow Disease, Just Shop Smarter

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By Mark Jeantheau

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Unless you've been trapped in a meat locker since December, you're no doubt aware that Mad Cow Disease has been detected in the US herd. Given that "bovine spongiform encephalopathy" is tougher on the mouth than one of the blow-torched steaks we get at Billy's House of Meat and Welding Supplies, we'll stick with the short form of the disease name----BSE.

The disease agent responsible for BSE is the prion, and it is unaffected by the heat of cooking or by irradiation. So forget about cooking your steak to a cinder before you eat it----that won't be any protection (and would be very upsetting to the Association of Beef Cooking Snobs).

Scientists say that the prion spreads between cows via the animal byproducts in their feed. The US Department of Agriculture is implementing new regulations that will reduce the amount of animal byproducts going into cattle feed, but indications are that there will still be a few loopholes in the rules.

Some people may just rely on the new USDA rules and hope for the best, but others may prefer to become choosier shoppers. There are a lot of different labels applied to beef these days, so let's go through what they mean under rules set by the US Department of Agriculture and talk about how they do or do not relate to BSE.

Organic ---- The organic label does apply to beef and has the backing of a legal standard and a certification system. In the case of beef, organic means that the animal (1) has undergone no genetic modification; (2) was fed grain that was not genetically modified and was free of chemical pesticides, fertilizers, animal byproducts and other adulterants; (3) was not treated with antibiotics, growth hormones, or chemical pesticides. Animals raised for organic meat must also have access to the outdoors, though that doesn't necessarily mean that they spend the majority of their time roaming the open grasslands.

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Free Range ---- This label is still mostly ungoverned by a legal standard and shouldn't be relied on to determine whether the cow actually spent most of its time on the open plains eating grass or that it ate any particular type of feed. "Free Range" is sometimes also called "free roaming."

Natural ---- This is another mostly meaningless term. As the USDA puts it: "All fresh meat qualifies as natural." Meat labeled "natural" (1) cannot contain any artificial flavor or flavoring, coloring ingredient, chemical preservative, or any other artificial or synthetic ingredient; and (2) can only be minimally processed (ground, for example). The USDA requires that meat packages labeled "natural" also include a statement clarifying the use of the term (such as "no added coloring"). In any event, animal byproducts are not specifically prohibited in the feed of cows raised for "natural" beef (though some beef labeled natural may indeed be free of animal byproducts).

Grass Fed ---- You'd think that any package of beef labeled "Grass Fed" would mean that the cow ate only grass. But given that all cows eat grass at least in the early stages of their lives, shady dealers could legally apply the "Grass Fed" label to beef from normal feed-lot cattle, which usually get a

corn-based feed mix that contains animal byproducts. This makes it necessary for you to ensure the label says "100% Grass Fed," "Grass Fed Only" or something similar that does not leave any loopholes. Beef raised only on grass may be slightly less tender than "normal" beef, but it has less overall fat, less saturated fat, higher vitamin A content, and more of the omega-3 fatty acids that help maintain healthy cells in your body. Beef that is 100% grass-fed may or may not be organic----all requirements under the organic standard would still have to be met for "100% grass fed" beef to be labeled organic.

No Antibiotics/No Hormones ---- Beef with either of these labels must be from a cow that was raised without the use of antibiotics or synthetic hormones over its entire lifetime. While both of these characteristics are desirable in your package of beef, neither has any bearing on BSE.

No Animal Byproducts ---- The regulations behind this label are not as strong as for the organic standard, but it's reasonable to assume that the label means what it says, that no animal byproducts were used in the feed of the cow(s).

Irradiation ---- Meat that has been irradiated to reduce bacteria levels must be labeled "Treated by Irradiation" or "Treated with Radiation." However, the irradiation levels used on beef do not deactivate the BSE disease agent.

Prime, Choice, and Select ---- These USDA grades are a subjective measure of quality and imply nothing about how the cow was raised or whether the cow's feed was free of animal byproducts.

Well, that's a lot of things to remember, so here are the three labels you really want to look for when you shop for beef: (a) Organic, (b) 100% Grass Fed, and/or (c) No Animal Byproducts. Beef with any one of these labels is virtually guaranteed to be free of BSE problems. Cows raised under the standards required for the organic and 100% grass fed labels yield environmental benefits too (compared to regular beef production).

Remember that we're not just talking about steaks and burgers as a potential source of BSE exposure. Processed beef products, including beef hotdogs, sausage, and meat sauce, also have the potential to contain BSE-contaminated beef. Granted, it is unlikely there would be such a problem, but since beef is available that has been raised in a way that virtually eliminates any BSE possibilities, why take any chance? And if the thought of eating ANY beef these days make you nearly have a cow, try soy-based beef alternatives—they're surprisingly tasty and beef-like these days.

No matter what your beefy fare, just remember what Mom said—"chew every bite 20 times"—and you'll be able to impress your friends with your rippling mandible muscles!

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Mark is a writer, financial analyst, web developer, environmentalist, and, as necessary, chef and janitor. Grinning Planet is an expression of Mark's enthusiasm for all things humorous and green, as well as a psychotic desire to work himself half-to-death. Hobbies include health foods, music, getting frustrated over politics, and occasionally lecturing the TV set on how uncreative it is.

Mad Cow Disease Revisited

By Thomas Ogren

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Thomas Ogren

The practice of feeding animals to non-carnivorous domestic animals is one that must be stopped now. It is entirely possible that the current news of mad cow disease is but the tip of the iceberg for future potential health problems.

When I used to milk cows I was encouraged by my vet to add "bone meal" to my feed as a way to increase protein levels in the dairy grain. Normally we would use extra soybean meal to jack the protein levels, but many farmers used bone meal. The bone meal consists of rendered bones and tissue from cattle. Essentially we were feeding cattle to cattle, a process that in retrospect seems 100% unnatural.

I have an MS degree in Agriculture and in one of my poultry classes in college we visited a huge egg

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ranch. The foreman there explained to us that if you examined the chicken manure you'd find that as much as 25% of the feed had gone through the chickens undigested and was still there in the manure. With this in mind they had started taking chicken manure, steaming it and then drying it, and were now mixing the chickens' own manure back into the chicken feed. By doing this they supposedly were saving some 20% on feed costs!

But then think of what this actually meant: they were feeding the hens their own manure. Also, in these highly confined cages hens would often die and the owners would just pull a dead hen from the cage and toss it into the manure under the cages. Thus, when they "re-processed" all that manure, there were plenty of chicken carcasses in it too. This would mean that they were now feeding chickens to chickens.

In mad cow disease we now know that prions are not killed by heat treatment. Feeding manure back to animals may make some sense from a purely monetary point of view, but from a larger, humanistic, holistic way of looking at things, it seems to be nothing but a recipe for disaster. It would seem that there needs to be more control exercised on what can be fed to not just cattle, but to all domestic farm animals. Our own health is at risk here, and in a sense of fair play, this practice seems to be more than a little insulting to the animals themselves.

Tom Ogren

Author of Allergy-free Gardening, and of, Safe Sex in the Garden www.allergyfreegardening.com

Thomas Ogren is the author of Allergy-Free Gardening, Ten Speed Press. Tom does consulting work on plants and allergies for the USDA, county asthma coalitions, and the Canadian and American Lung Associations. He has appeared on HGTV and The Discovery Channel. His book, Safe Sex in the Garden, was published in 2003. In 2004 Time Warner Books published his latest book: What the Experts May NOT Tell You About: Growing the Perfect Lawn. His website: www.allergyfree-gardening.com

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