

**Branch Hillsdale St. Joseph Community Health Agency**  
**Fact sheet on Mad Cow Disease**  
**1/5/04**

**Just what is a mad cow? (A grumpy Guernsey?)**

What is Mad Cow Disease? Mad cow disease is also called bovine spongiform encephalopathy (sorry I asked!) Bovine spongiform encephalopathy commonly referred to as BSE, is a slowly progressive, degenerative, fatal disease affecting the central nervous system of adult cattle. Mad Cow disease is not transmitted between cattle, like the flu in humans, and is primarily acquired from infected feed.

**Does BSE affect humans?**

Mad cow is a disease that affects cattle. However, there is a disease similar to BSE called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), which is found in humans. There is strong scientific evidence that the agent that causes mad cow in cattle is the agent that causes vCJD in people. As of December 1, 2003, a total of 153 cases of vCJD had been reported in the world: 143 from England, six from France, and one each from Canada, Ireland, Italy, and the United States. The only reported case of vCJD in the United States was from a young woman that contracted the disease while residing in the England. The symptoms appeared years later after the young woman moved to the U.S.

**What is being done to recognize the increase in cases of vCJD in the United States?**

With heightened concern about vCJD in Europe, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have enhanced their vCJD surveillance in the U.S.

**When you say cow, I say milk. What about milk?**

Milk and milk products from cows are not believed to pose any risk for transmitting the mad cow agent because experiments have shown that milk from infected cows has not caused mad cow in people.

**Is BSE a hazard to food in the United States?**

Strong evidence indicates that BSE has been transmitted to humans primarily in England. In England, where over 1 million cattle may have been infected with BSE, there appears to be a barrier limiting the transmission to protect humans preventing widespread illness. The risk to human health from BSE in the United States at this time is extremely low.

**What is being done to prevent Canadian products that may be contaminated with BSE from entering the United States?**

The U.S. added Canada to its BSE restricted countries list, and USDA and FDA expanded their restrictions on imports from BSE countries to Canadian products. FDA will continue to work with USDA to stop a wide variety of products (animal feed, human food) with bovine-derived materials from being imported into the U.S. from BSE restricted countries, including Canada. In addition, both FDA and USDA are cooperating with the Customs Service to ensure food safety at the border.

For more information contact your local environmental health office at:

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