

# Why are people so angry about mad cow disease?

Here's the idea: You write in with a question, and I do a little research to supply you with an answer. The questions can vary from "Why is the sky blue?" to "Why do my feet stick to the floors of movie theaters?"

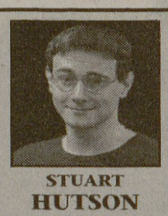
To start things off, I will begin by approaching a subject that hits close to home since Texas A&M is heavily involved with cattle science.

**Question:** What the heck is mad cow disease, and how much are we in the United States at risk of being harmed by it?

— Stuart Hutson, senior journalism major

**Answer:** I will be honest here. After a deluge of recent news reports about this particular disease, I did not have the slightest idea what this was or how it was spread.

Feeling a little uninformed, I began investi-



STUART HUTSON

gating and, after a little research, I discovered why I had no clue: neither do the experts.

Usually, if a disease is declared a possible public health hazard (such as mad cow disease has been in England) it is because of some nasty little virus or bacteria.

But Jeff Savell, an animal science professor at A&M, said the disease is apparently caused by a naturally occurring protein in the animal's system.

"This would be a lot easier to deal with if it was a virus, but this is a disease that just occurs, resulting in a spongy appearance in the brain and nervous tissue," he said. "The real name is bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), but since it results in a loss of control of the nervous system — which of course makes the cows stumble around and fall down — it was called mad cow disease by people in Great Britain, who use the word 'mad' like crazy."

Savell said it is not known how the disease is spread or even if it is spread at all.

The disease appears when this protein is around,

but exactly how it causes BSE is not known.

The human counterpart of the disease is the Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) which, according to the American Medical Association, occurs in about one per every million people naturally, regardless of diet.

Savell said major concerns about it arose when the disease, which usually occurs in the elderly, began popping up in 20- and 30-year-olds in Great Britain in the '80s.

"There was, of course, then concern that this was coming from BSE," he said. "But no real evidence has ever really shown this."

This concern resulted in close scrutiny of herds, and the United States officially stopped importing cattle from Great Britain in 1985.

Ever since, any herds that have the disease have been destroyed since the protein that causes mad cow disease cannot be destroyed by typical methods used to destroy viruses or bacteria.

As for the danger to the United States populace, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, cattle in the United States has

been closely monitored for 10 years, and not a case of BSE has been found.

However, Savell warned that the disease has been found in deer.

"It is known to exist in the deer population, but I've only heard of one case of a hunter getting CJD," he said. "And again, that brings up the question of whether he was one of the one million that will get the disease anyway."

Ok, to sum things up, mad cow disease is just a little floating protein that turns cow and human brains to sponge. It is not in U.S. beef, but watch out for deer (call it Bambi's revenge). Overall, researchers are not sure how it is spread, but hey, as my mother always says, "Better safe than sorry."

Confused yet? Well, if there is anything you would like clarified or would like to submit a question, send an email to [scifyi@hotmail.com](mailto:scifyi@hotmail.com) and I will see if I can help.

Stuart Hutson is a senior journalism major.

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