

America's Food Supply Is Safe

Food Safety, 2000

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) is a trade association, marketing organization, and advocate for America's cattle [farmers](#) and ranchers. Its members work to ensure the safety and quality of American beef.

The [food supply](#) in America, especially its beef supply, is safe. When food-borne illnesses occur, the cause is more likely the improper handling or preparation of food, instead of the use of chemicals and [pesticides](#) by farmers and ranchers. The efforts of the federal government and the beef industry help ensure that America's food does not pose health risks.

Americans have the safest food supply in the world. No other country can match the effective [food safety](#) record of the [United States](#)—no other country monitors domestically-produced and imported foods as closely.

No responsible scientist in the food system would deny there are substances in the food supply that could be nasty if consumed in excess amounts, but bodies aren't piling up because of lethal substances in food. Diet-related health conditions are related to our overall habits, not to specific food chemicals, present in minuscule amounts.—Dr. Joyce Nettleton, Institute of Food Technologists, 1996.

*From my 22 years in researching and studying food and food safety, I have total confidence in the safety of the U.S. food supply. Can foods be safer? Yes. And the [food industry](#) and government are working diligently on new technologies and programs to improve the safety and quality of foods.—Dr. H. Russell Cross, professor of animal science at Texas A&M University and former administrator of the U.S. [Agriculture](#) Department's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), *Dallas Morning News*, May 27, 1994.*

*Our society has come to fear technology and reject anything scientifically or chemically related. Despite all the evidence of our physical well-being beyond the dreams of all previous generations, we seem to have become a nation of easily frightened people. Americans have been described as "the healthiest hypochondriacs in the world."—Dr. James Marsden, vice president, Scientific and Technical Affairs, American Meat Institute, "A Scientist's Perspective on Food Safety," *Nation's Restaurant News*, Aug. 27, 1990.*

The U.S. beef supply is safe

- There are no "hidden ingredients" in fresh cuts of beef.
- Fresh cuts of beef are not treated with additives or preservatives.
- Used judiciously, animal-health products and other compounds currently used in cattle production and feeding do not cause residue problems.

A major reason overseas customers purchase U.S. beef is confidence in its safety.... U.S. government

monitoring and inspection programs are recognized around the world, as is the cattle industry's Beef Quality Assurance Program which helps prevent hazardous residue.—Dr. Gary Smith, meat scientist, Colorado State University, 1995.

As shown by government residue testing and monitoring, American cattlemen continue to produce beef without hazardous residues.—Dr. Gary Cowman, National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) director of Beef Quality Assurance, 1996.

The progress we've made in the last decade shows that meat and poultry products are safe from chemical contaminants. Our testing data give convincing evidence, and the new preventive approach holds great promise for the future. We are confident that chemical residues in meat and poultry pose little risk to consumers.—Dr. Catherine E. Adams, FSIS, USDA, 1990.

Risk assessors rank the health risks from chemical residues in food products as negligible because residues are generally so small that they are unlikely to threaten even the most susceptible and most exposed individuals with a significant risk of cancer or other diseases.—USDA, 1995.

Consumers have more confidence in the safety of beef than any other meat. Even though beef attracts media scrutiny because more of it is consumed on a daily basis than other meats, consumers consistently give beef high marks for safety.

Chemicals and pesticides are not harmful

A small segment of the industry's producers and purveyors has built niche markets for a product that carries the USDA natural label. While this product may be the result of cattle that have not been treated with antibiotics or implanted with hormones, in reality, all fresh beef qualifies for the natural label. By law, natural products must contain no [food additives](#) and be minimally processed. Test results from Colorado State University in 1995 conclude beef raised from cattle raised without the use of growth promotants or other technological tools was not significantly different from traditionally produced beef.

Fresh Beef Is Very Low in Illness-Causing Bacteria. [Salmonella](#) organisms are found less often on beef than other meats. According to USDA, based on sampling at processing plants, fresh beef is very low in incidence of Salmonella on the meat; 35.2 percent of chicken broiler samples contained Salmonella; 12 percent of pork samples contained Salmonella organisms; and only 1.8 percent of beef samples contained Salmonella.

Foodborne illness is caused primarily by improper storage, handling and preparation of foods.

Consumers can be assured that FSIS is testing the U.S. meat and poultry supply for drug and chemical contaminants. Any problems are dealt with quickly. Where consumers can be most effective is in controlling conditions in their own kitchens that might allow growth of bacteria that can [lead](#) to illness.—Dr. Richard Carnevale, FSIS, 1991.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that a quarter of the estimated 8 million cases of food-borne illness each year could have been prevented by safe food practices.—Dr. Robert Gravani, Food Technology magazine, February 1992.

Chemical residues in food are not a problem. The government system of approval for animal drugs and pesticides builds in sweeping safety margins. As an example, maximum levels of pesticide residue allowed in or on food are 100-1,000 times lower than could pose a threat over a lifetime. The Agriculture Council of America says a 150 lb. adult would have to eat 3,000 heads of lettuce each day for the rest of his/her life to ingest an amount of pesticide found to cause problems in laboratory mice.

Possible chemical contamination of our food supply is not a serious threat. Regulation of food additives, pesticides and animal drugs helps assure ample protection of the public. There is no evidence that pesticides in our foods constitute a significant health hazard.—Dr. Michael W. Pariza, director, Food Research Institute, chairman, Department of Food Microbiology and Toxicology, University of Wisconsin, December 1991.

Naturally occurring compounds in food pose a far greater risk than synthetic ones—and that risk is negligible.

Ordinary table spices, including mustard and peppers, contain a variety of naturally occurring [carcinogens](#) which pose substantially higher risks than do any [pesticide residues](#) or food additives. If we want to reduce the risk of death by cancer, we have to look first at the naturally occurring carcinogens found in foods. Cancer is an important [public health](#) concern, but if we attack it by chasing after specific ingredients such as Alar or Red Dye 3, we're not going to make much of a difference. That is because food additives, as well as animal-health products, have been thoroughly tested before being implemented.—Dr. Robert Scheuplein, director, Toxicological Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, 1991.

All animal drugs and pesticides used on crops fed to livestock go through rigorous testing before approval by the FDA or EPA.

The FDA either sets zero tolerance for drug residues or it sets tolerances based on extensive research and testing. It's important to keep in mind that we build a 1,000-fold or 2,000-fold safety factor (for allergic reactions) into our tolerances (for animal drug residues). This helps to avoid ill effects even when a residue occurs that slightly exceeds the legal limit. The same (principle) holds true for the potential risk of cancer from residues of carcinogenic drugs (in animal tests). We aren't aware of any cases of cancer than can be linked to drug residues in food.—Dr. Gerald Guest, FDA, 1989.

Violative residues in livestock and poultry continue to decline each year. They were lower in 1993 than 1992. Drug residues in beef continued to decline; of 5,439 samples of beef tested last year, eight had illegal levels of drugs and all eight violations occurred in cull dairy cows. There were no pesticide residue violations in the 5,439 beef samples.—Dr. Richard Carnevale, FSIS.

Bacteria and other micro-organisms in food are a more serious health issue than chemical residues. Although consumers express concern about chemical contamination, most experts believe microbial contamination poses a greater hazard to human health than pesticide or animal drug residues.—People, the Public Health & [Consumer Protection](#), USDA FSIS, 1990.

BSE poses no threat to U.S. consumers. [Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy](#) (BSE), inappropriately dubbed by some as Mad Cow Disease, is a degenerative neurological disease in cattle. It was first identified in England in 1986. An outbreak of the disease in England in 1995 caused world-wide concern when speculation arose that BSE might be linked to a rare brain condition in humans known as Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD).

- USDA has tested thousands of cattle brains and never found BSE in the United States.
- Since 1989, the U.S. has banned [imports](#) of live ruminant animals and ruminant products from the United Kingdom and other countries where BSE has been identified.
- There is no scientific evidence that BSE in cattle and CJD in humans are linked.
- CJD occurs at a consistent rate of one case per million people per year among vegetarians and meat eaters alike, in countries where BSE has been found and has not been found.

... The evidence against British beef is purely circumstantial. And, since no cases of BSE have been identified in the U.S., there currently seems to be no reason in this country to worry about CJD from eating beef.—Susan Male Smith, M.A., R.D., cited in *Environmental Nutrition*, 1996.

BSE is not found in the muscle tissue of cattle eaten as beef. Scientific evidence indicates beef and milk do not present a risk to people as there is no evidence the agent that causes BSE is present in muscle and milk.—International Food Information Council, September 1996.

Government and market inspections

Federal inspection systems ensure consumer safety. More than 2 million analyses of meat and poultry samples are performed each year. USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service obtains samples of tissue from harvested animals and analyzes those samples. Findings are sent to FDA field offices for follow-up. Regulatory action is taken against those responsible for any residues above legal limits.

Health experts agree food-safety problems stem mainly from improper storage and handling by those who prepare food rather than from residues in food.

There is no food product more closely scrutinized by the government before it is purchased by consumers than meat. USDA devotes eight times the resources to inspecting the nation's meat and poultry as the Food and Drug Administration devotes to the rest of the food supply. The federal government spends more than \$1 million each day employing USDA's 7,000 meat and poultry inspectors who are in every packing plant, every minute it operates, every day it operates. By comparison, FDA-inspected food plants may see their inspector once every several years.—J. Patrick Boyle, president and CEO, American Meat Institute, January 1992.

Cattlemen go the extra mile with Beef Quality Assurance. To ensure continued safety and to maintain consumer confidence, the beef industry initiated a Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program in 1987 that focuses on product safety. The Beef Quality Assurance program encourages cattlemen in every state to follow production practices and quality-control measures that exceed government requirements as related to pharmaceutical use. Besides cow/calf producers, a 1994 USDA survey showed almost 87 percent of the nation's feedlots had quality-assurance training for employees.

The program does not add cost to the final product. In fact, since the program began, it has saved the beef industry in excess of \$20 million, helping the industry stabilize product cost to consumers.

Beef Quality Assurance is a way for cattlemen to prevent any possible hazardous residues and to demonstrate to consumers that the industry is committed to producing a safe and wholesome product.

The program promotes use of production practices and quality control for animal-pharmaceutical use that provide safety measures which exceed government requirements. The BQA program also teaches cattlemen and feedlot operators about cattle handling, feed purchasing, record keeping, testing and other procedures.

It is simply a way for cattlemen to prevent any possible hazardous residues and to demonstrate that cattlemen remain committed to producing a safe, nutritious, healthful product for consumers with no added ingredients or preservatives.

\$1 billion a year—\$4 per consumer—is spent on beef-safety programs by the packing industry to ensure that beef products are completely safe.

Government tests show there are no hazardous residue levels of any chemical compound in beef. In fact, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) tests repeatedly demonstrate that beef, of all fresh food commodities, has one of the safest records for lack of chemical contamination.—Dr. Gary Cowman, Director of Beef Quality Assurance, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, September 1994.

New HACCP regulations aimed at improved safety. In 1996 USDA adopted the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) regulation which requires all meat and poultry processing plants to develop and implement HACCP programs. In a nutshell, HACCP is a systematic, comprehensive science-based approach to assure the production of safe food. The new regulation requires all processing plants to conduct regular microbial testing of raw meat to verify that process control for fecal contamination—the source of pathogens—is working.

For more than 10 years, the National Academy of Sciences, university researchers and beef producers and packers have urged that inspections be made more science-based, focusing on control of invisible bacteria and not just visually identified problems. With the new HACCP-based regulations, we can further improve beef safety. Beef already has a good microbiological profile. Now, with the further use of new technologies and modern procedures, we can do even more to remove any contaminants and destroy pathogenic bacteria. Meanwhile, of course, proper cooking and

handling remain important too.—Dr. Gary Weber, NCBA director of animal health and [meat inspection](#), *The Beef Brief*, August 1996.

Beef processors must meet zero-tolerance standards. Even though, poultry is allowed a defined number of defects before inspection action is taken, beef conforms to a zero-tolerance standard for fecal and ingesta contamination which required carcass trimming in the past. Aggressive industry efforts have resulted in new technology—such as high temperature vacuuming—which enables compliance with zero-tolerance standards while helping to eliminate carcass waste.

Beef cattle producers and companies have invested millions of dollars to develop HACCP plans and new technologies, such as the high temperature steam vacuum system, to ensure beef and beef products continue to be safe and wholesome. The implementation of HACCP in every plant will add an additional measure of safety to our products.—John Lacey, former NCBA president, 1996.

Understanding beef safety

Q. How does the safety of beef compare to that of other fresh meats?

A. Beef is one of the safest foods available to consumers. USDA and FDA tests indicate that, among all fresh commodities, beef has the lowest probability of contamination by either chemicals or microbes.

Q. Are there any pesticide or antibiotic residues in beef?

A. Substantial testing has shown that the violative residue rate (antibiotic, chemical and pesticide) is virtually zero in beef.

Q. Cattlemen appear to have some limits on their ability to prevent possible residues in beef. What about factors over which they do not have direct control? For example, using feeds they didn't grow which might contain potentially hazardous levels of pesticides?

A. First, there is no evidence that pesticides on crops are causing health problems as a result of beef use. Second, the industry's safety assurance program calls for testing of feed ingredients to assure that there are no violative levels of pesticides. Another factor is, no matter what kind of environmental contaminant or toxin (such as a natural or a manmade pesticide) might be in feed or water, animals generally eliminate the noxious substance by naturally biodegrading it.

Q. What is the responsibility of federal regulators and inspectors in helping assure safe products?

A. Federal regulators screen and approve new products and technologies, such as feed additives. It is possible that an isolated food grower, as well as a processor and marketer, will not adequately guard against chemical or microbial contamination, so both legal requirements and voluntary safety-assurance programs are advisable.

Q. Some activists claim "factory farming" and other techniques are poisoning the food supply. Is that true?

A. No. The food supply is the safest it has ever been in this country. Health experts in this country agree that safety problems associated with food are primarily due to improper storage and handling by food preparers and consumers, not because of residues found in the food.

Q. Are "naturally" or "organically" grown foods safer?

A. There is no evidence that "organically" raised beef is safer than "conventionally" raised beef. Results of 1992 and 1994 studies at Colorado State University revealed no violative residues in beef. There are 16,000 times more residues from "naturally" occurring pesticides in foods than residues from synthetic compounds. But in both cases, the food is safe.

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