

Alarm over beef link to breast cancer

By SEAN POULTER



The EU currently forbids imports of American beef from the U.S. which is produced using an array of hormones

Fears about eating beef from cattle pumped up with growth hormones have been raised by a government expert.

John Verrall said there is alarming evidence it can trigger breast and other cancers, bring forward puberty in girls and increase the risk of genital abnormalities in boys.

Mr Verrall, a member of a Government advisory committee, is so concerned that he has defied an official attempt to gag him.

He points to a rise in rates of breast and prostate cancer in the U.S., where two-thirds of cattle are treated with hormones.

The EU currently bans the use of growth or sex hormones to fatten up cattle and speed their maturity. It also forbids imports of American beef from the U.S. which is produced using an array of hormones.

But there are serious doubts whether the ban is being enforced, as there is no testing of imports for tell-tale hormone residue.

In any case, the U.S. government, with the support of Tony Blair's administration, is trying to have the embargo lifted. The Government's Veterinary Products Committee is due to publish a report in the next few days which will declare that beef produced with hormones is safe.

This could clear the way for farmers in this country to use growth hormone injections and speed the lifting of the ban on imports of 'super-size' beef from the U.S.

But Mr Verrall, a pharmaceutical chemist who was appointed to the VPC to represent consumer interests, has refused to sanction the all-clear.

He wanted to publish a minority report to highlight the dangers, but the committee, supported by the food and farming department DEFRA headed by David Miliband, refused to allow it.

Despite this, Mr Verrall has decided to go public.

The suspect hormones are oestradiol, testosterone, progesterone, zeranol, trenbolone and megestrol acetate.

Mr Verrall said: 'There is clear evidence of the risk to human health posed by these hormones.'

He cited research showing that oestradiol is considered a cancer risk. Work by a highly-respected Danish university found that residues of oestradiol in treated beef were up to five times higher than the levels in other cattle.

The hormones can disrupt the natural balance in the body, with the danger of multiple biological effects.

'Recent studies show that children are extremely sensitive to some hormones'

It has been claimed that eating treated beef may cause girls to reach puberty earlier, thus making them more susceptible to breast and other cancers in later life. For boys, there may be an increased risk of prostate cancer.

The presence of powerful female hormones in the diet of pregnant women could effect the development of the genital organs of boys.

Mr Verrall said there is evidence of higher breast and prostate cancer rates in the U.S., where most consumers regularly eat beef from cattle injected with growth hormones.

The rate of breast cancer among women in the U.S. is put at 97 per 100,000 against 67 in Europe. Similarly the rate of prostate cancer in men is 96 in America and only 37 in Europe.

Mr Verrall said: 'Recent studies show that children are extremely sensitive to some hormones which can cause sudden growth or breast development, even at levels which are difficult to detect in the laboratory.'

'It is now clear that very much smaller amounts of sex hormones in food than previously thought can cause genital abnormalities in baby boys, premature puberty in girls and increase the risk of some cancers later in life.'

The British Veterinary Association also opposes the lifting of a ban on the use of growth hormones in this country.

It said last night that, given the health uncertainties, 'the European ban seems the safer route to follow, particularly as there is no need, other than economic gain, to use these hormones.'

The Food Standards Agency has also made clear that it would want a full safety review before the current ban on the use of such hormones by British farmers and others in Europe is removed.

The Soil Association last night condemned the VPC's attempts to Richard Young, policy adviser at the Soil Association, which supports organic farming, said the government's VPC had failed consumers by not properly assessing the latest research on hormone effects.

He called for the resumption of testing of beef imports for hormone residues in order to ensure consumers are not eating potentially harmful meat.

Mr Young said: 'We are particularly concerned that no imported beef has been tested for oestradiol - or its metabolites. This serious failing must be addressed as a matter of urgency.'

He warned that the hormone testing regime for beef imports is probably no better in most of the other EU countries than it is in the UK.

Around 39 per cent of the beef eaten in Britain is imported. The bulk is from Ireland, but substantial quantities also come from Brazil and Argentina, where controls over drugs and hormones are not as strict.

Concerns over hormone residues

The imported meat is sold both fresh and processed into corned beef. Some supermarkets have been stocking fresh Brazilian beef and it is used widely in the catering and restaurant trade.

There is also a concern that British consumers could be at risk from eating beef when taking holidays in the U.S. or other countries with comparatively lax controls.

Hormones have been used extensively in the production of both beef and milk in the U.S. since the 1970s. They are essentially the male and female sex hormones - oestrogen (oestradiol), testosterone and progesterone - plus their synthetic equivalents.

As many as two-thirds of cattle raised in the U.S are treated with these hormones, through either injections or implants.

The effect of the drugs is to speed the animals' development and maturity.

But there are concerns that hormone residues in the meat are having the same effect on people who eat it, with potentially disastrous consequences. American researchers have noticed that the onset of puberty in young girls has been moving forward in recent decades.

Carlos Sonnenschein, from Tufts University School of Medicine, in Boston, Massachusetts, said hormone residues appear to be the most likely cause.

He warned: 'Early onset of puberty with its raging hormones translates into higher risk of breast cancer.'

An expert scientific panel to the US National Toxicology Program has also concluded that all forms of oestrogen should be listed as 'known cancer-causing agents'.