

Ottawa's mad cow advice 'hypocritical'

Canadians not told to change eating habits

By Michelle Lang

When Canadian travellers are visiting countries with even a single case of mad cow disease, Health Canada advises against eating high-risk beef products such as ground meat.

But when a case of the deadly disease surfaced in Alberta, the federal agency told Canadians not to change their eating habits.

"It's the most hypocritical thing I've ever seen," said Bradford Duplisea, a researcher for the Canadian Health Coalition, a Ottawa-based health advocacy association.

"If this was about protecting the health of Canadians, we would have given them the same warnings we gave to Canadians travelling abroad," he added.

Scientists believe certain types of beef -- such as ground beef, processed meat and sausages -- are at a higher risk of transmitting the disease to humans than boneless meat cuts like steaks. Mad cow, which is formally called bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), has been linked to about 120 human deaths, most in the United Kingdom.

After a cow in northern Alberta was diagnosed with BSE on May 20, Ottawa never issued an advisory about what types of beef are more likely to carry the disease.

Instead, Health Canada released a statement two days later saying "we have no reason to recommend that Canadians change their eating habits" because the sick cow was condemned and did not enter the food supply.

Yet, a travel advisory from the department recommends steering clear of processed meats or avoiding beef altogether while visiting international locales where BSE has been identified in the cattle herd. The advisory includes five nations that, like Canada, have only one case of mad cow: Austria, Finland, Greece, Israel and Poland.

Health Canada representatives said the travel advisories are necessary because Canadian officials do not have enough information to ensure other countries with BSE have adequate safeguards to protect their meat.

Ottawa stands by its decision not to issue similar advisories about eating domestic beef. Carole Saindon, a spokeswoman for Health Canada, said Canada has had only one sick cow and authorities here were able to ensure no one consumed the animal.



No other instances of mad cow disease turned up during a Canadian Food Inspection Agency investigation into the case.

"We've had one case of BSE, but our food safety hasn't been threatened," she said.

Health Canada's argument that the country only has one case of BSE doesn't wash with Duplisea. He notes an international panel of experts who examined the mad cow situation believe Canada could have more than one case of the disease.

"(There is) the possibility that other animals may have been exposed and are incubating the disease," the panelists wrote in their report.

The report recommends protecting the food supply from other possible cases of BSE by removing materials such as the brain and spinal cord, which are thought to carry the disease, from the animal at slaughter.

Canada implemented the recommendation in July and now requires slaughterhouses to remove the high-risk materials from cattle older than 30 months before their meat is processed.

"That removes 99 per cent of human exposure to (high-risk) materials," said Saindon.

The removal of the material at slaughter is a very effective way to take most of the risk out of eating domestic beef, according to Mansel Griffiths, director of the Canadian Research Institute for Food Safety.

He said the new policy should make it relatively safe to eat Canadian hamburger and sausages.

"The chances of a thing like nervous tissue getting into the human food chain should be fairly low," said Griffiths.

But Duplisea isn't convinced. He said the only way for Canadians to ensure their beef is safe is to get to know their local butcher and buy meat from grass-fed cattle, noting that cows contract BSE by eating contaminated feed.

"We know that some products are higher risk than others. We should be telling Canadians to avoid those products," he said.

This story featured a factbox "Health Canada travel advisory"

Health Canada travel advisory

- Recommends not consuming beef or beef products in any country with one or more cases of mad cow in order to avoid any risk of contracting the human variant of the disease.
- Alternatively, travellers should reduce consumption of beef while in those countries and consume only whole cuts of meat without attached spinal bone.
- Recommends travellers avoid processed meats such as sausages, burgers or patés while visiting countries where the disease is present.