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Food: Is it safe?

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Mad cows, madder consumers

Is it just me, or is it a really dumb idea to feed cows to cows? Or pigs to cows, or chickens to cows. Aren't cows supposed to eat grass?

Feeding cows to cows is believed to be how mad cow disease (BSE) originally spread in the U.K.. This practice is now banned. But you can still feed cows to pigs and then feed those pigs to cows. Somehow, this just doesn't seem very bright.

Eating meat infected with BSE could cause the deadly variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease (vCJD) in humans, but most food safety experts say the risk is low. So far, only two animals in North America have tested positive for BSE.

Concerned consumers can reduce the risk of eating infected meat by avoiding the beef cuts most likely to be contaminated – the brain, spinal column and surrounding tissues. This means no more "mystery meat" found in processed meat products like hotdogs.

But this doesn't change the real problem, which is inherent in "factory farming." To meet a growing demand for cheap meat, livestock operations have changed substantially over the past few decades – both in terms of scale and organization. Chickens and pigs do not run around the farm yard and cattle are not all raised on the range – they are being "grown" in giant feedlot operations called factory farms.

Factory farms are large facilities where hundreds to thousands of animals (cows, pigs, chickens or turkeys) are confined and provided little or no access to sunlight, fresh air or room for movement. Animals are fed antibiotics – very similar to the ones used for humans – to stave off infections, as well as other growth stimulants.

Leaving aside whether this is a humane way to treat animals, factory farms create huge amounts of manure that must be stored and treated. Improperly managed manure can contaminate drinking water and nearby streams and lakes. This happens in our coastal waters too. Open netcages where farmed salmon are raised are essentially factory farms in the ocean and cause similar problems

Read Dr. Suzuki's take on factory farming.

For a funny look at factory farms, visit The Meatrix.

and to learn about an alternative, see http://www.colabeef.ca/Cola_beef/

Best meat choices:
Find out where your meat comes from. Choose free-range, antibiotic-free chicken and pork, and grass and grain-fed beef from family farms. Organic meat is another healthy and environmentally sensible choice. Butchers at specialty stores and local meat stores can be quite informative about their products.

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