Health Panel: Beef Benefits American Diet

By ACSH Staff — January 1, 2004

Beef is a wholesome, safe food that makes nutritious contributions to the American diet. This is the conclusion of a literature review recently conducted by physicians and scientists associated with the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH).

The scientific facts on beef and health are detailed in a new ACSH publication, *The Role of Beef in the Diet* [1].

Despite the positive news about beef, nutrition, and health, many Americans are misinformed and think that including beef in their diets will have negative health consequences. But, as the ACSH report [1] explains, many of the supposed health risks associated with consuming beef lack strong scientific support or have been exaggerated.

For example, concerns have been raised about the fact that beef contains saturated fat ostensibly the kind that raises blood cholesterol levels. But in fact, 2/3 of the fats in beef are of the type that do not raise cholesterol levels. Scientific studies have shown that a diet that includes moderate portions of lean beef is similar to one containing poultry or fish in its effects on blood cholesterol levels.

Some groups have also raised fears that red meat of any type will increase the risk of various types of cancer. But the scientific evidence on this point is equivocal some studies find an effect, others do not. ACSH does not consider this fear to be strongly supported.

Like other food products, beef products are subject to microbial contamination. The beef industry is implementing a number of techniques, such as food irradiation and special washing procedures, to minimize the likelihood of this problem. Consumers can also safeguard their foods by using proper handling and cooking techniques.

The use of hormones as growth promoters in beef cattle has come under attack. But the amount of extra hormones in meat from treated animals is very small compared to the amount produced by the animals themselves, as well as by the humans consuming the meat.

Sub-therapeutic use of antibiotics in beef cattle production has also been criticized on the grounds that the practice could promote the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. It is not clear that such treatment significantly contributes to the overall problem of antibiotic resistance, but the Food and Drug Administration will take such concerns into account when deciding whether to approve new drugs for use in animals.

"Beef provides many important nutrients and is a valuable component of the American diet," stated Dr. Ruth Kava, ACSH nutrition director. Beef provides zinc and iron, two minerals that are often in short supply in many Americans' diets. Further, the iron is in a form that is well-absorbed, which is
not true of iron from vegetable sources. In addition, beef contains high-quality protein, B vitamins, choline, and selenium.

"Moderate portions of lean beef are important sources of nutrients in the American diet," stated Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, ACSH president. "It would be unfortunate if American consumers deprived themselves of the nutritional benefits of beef because of unsubstantiated fears and misinformation."

Related Links
The Role of Beef in the American Diet [2]

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