

# WHAT'S IN OUR MEAT?

*By Kassy Kemp, contributing editor*

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The food we eat is the basis of our body's nourishment. This food is responsible for nourishing growth, promoting healing, giving energy and encouraging mental stamina. Without proper nutrition all of these functions are seriously impaired. Unfortunately, Americans focus on taste, convenience and aesthetics of the food that they purchase rather than its nutritional value. Most Americans, then, are functioning on less than what their bodies need. What, then, do we need, and what are we lacking? This is the question that should drive our shopping carts.

As I stated last month, I have just recently come to this awareness, and I am adding to my knowledge of good nutrition daily. There are many concerns for the natural shopper to deal with. These include: preventing cancer and other diseases, treating nutritional abnormalities (such as diabetes, hypoglycemia, anemia, high blood pressure, etc.), promoting overall wellness, and supporting the environment. My specific concern is for mothers who are trying to make sense of these issues and who are often looking for practical ways to incorporate a natural approach to living into their daily routines.

This month's article will begin a two part series, which will deal with one of the most volatile issues in nutrition: meat. How often should I eat meat? Should I eat meat at all? Why are so many people becoming vegetarians? What are some practical ways to eat meat safely? I hope that I can begin to answer these questions for some of you and inspire you to seek out more information, making your own choices based on good judgment.

There are many dietary risks associated with a diet high in animal products, some of which are: heart attack, stroke, diabetes, obesity, etc. The traditional approach to treating these problems recommends an increase in the diet of fresh fruits and vegetables and a decrease in the amount of meat products consumed. Most people are aware of at least some of these concerns and many try to use more produce in their diets in order to curb these problems.

However, many women I come across are only vaguely aware of the chemical residues that are present in meat, poultry, milk and eggs. They may have read a newspaper article or seen a package in the supermarket advertising a hormone-free product, but they are unaware of the extent to which these products compromise our health. Others just can't bring themselves to believe that there can be anything wrong with USDA approved meat.

But meat and poultry contain numerous chemical and hormonal residues, including growth stimulating hormones, pesticides from feed, antibiotics and other pharmaceuticals. I plan to deal primarily with the issue of growth hormones in this article. Hormonal meat is approved because the USDA has determined that the chemical residues found in meat and dairy are at acceptable levels. As we will discuss later, however, not all experts agree with this assessment.

Today, 90% of American cattle intended for slaughter are implanted with one of six approved hormones<sup>1</sup> in order to increase the body weight of the animal by about 10%<sup>2</sup>. The use of these hormones has sparked furious debate between scientists in varying camps. A coalition of European countries has commissioned a group of scientists in order to support an eleven-year ban on imports of hormonal beef. They note that the North American countries with the highest rates of hormone-dependent cancer (breast, endometrium, ovary, prostate, testes and colon) are also the countries where the consumption of hormone treated meat is most prevalent<sup>3</sup>. In other words, there appears to be a direct correlation between these hormonal meats and the number of cancer cases in the U.S.

But even worse is the concern these scientists have voiced that prepubertal children are at the greatest risk when exposed to hormonal meats. According to Dr. Epstein "the amount of estradiol [the most commonly

used growth hormone] in two hamburgers eaten in one day by an 8-year-old boy could increase his total hormone levels by as much as 10%." And these are the results from legal residues of hormones; many are illegally implanted in the muscle, rather than under the ear skin, a practice that results in even higher concentrations of hormones in meat<sup>4</sup>. The question is, do these hormones cause cancer in children or adults?

I believe, as do many others more qualified than I to write this article, that the raised hormone levels in people caused by these meats are linked to the increase of reproductive cancers in the United States. To illustrate this point, scientists have pointed out that since 1950, breast cancer has increased by 55%, testicular cancer by 120% and prostate cancer by 190% (all hormone-dependent cancers)<sup>5</sup>. Many other studies have pointed to drawn suspicion on the practices of the meat industry.

Animal drugs, such as antibiotics, are widely used to fight the diseases that plague animals raised in less than ideal circumstances. Chickens, for example, are allotted less than a square foot per animal. They are therefore walking and eating in their own excrement. Drugs are given routinely to counteract the inevitable spread of disease. According to Dr. Epstein, there are 143 drugs and pesticides found in edible animal tissues and only 43 of these drugs are monitored. Forty of the drugs and pesticides, which cause residues in meat and poultry, are carcinogenic (cancer causing), and another 18 cause birth defects<sup>6</sup>.

Other concerns have been raised with regard to the routine use of antibiotics to treat disease, which are just as critical as the cancer issue. Some studies have suggested that this routine use of antibiotics could produce an antibiotic-resistant strain of bacteria, which could subsequently be transferred to humans. In other words, the routine treatment of antibiotics in animals promotes a resistance to that antibiotic and eventually, stronger bacteria<sup>7</sup>. Although these issues have garnered public attention in recent years, little has been done to decrease the risk associated with agricultural chemicals. I remember seeing a news special dealing with the issue of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, but there were no suggestions given on how to buy meat which was not contaminated, nor were there any "follow-ups" to track further developments in the meat industry.

That is why I see it as imperative to provide practical advice for finding and using safe products. It is sometimes hard to know what is a good and safe product. Shopping at the health food store isn't even a sure way to avoid harmful chemicals. In my next article I will discuss natural meat selections in the South Texas area as well as some tips on finding safe products in the supermarket. I will also touch on the issue of vegetarianism: its benefits and drawbacks.

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### ***footnotes:***

<sup>1</sup> Michael Balter, "Scientific Cross-Claims Fly in Continuing Beef War," *Science* 28 May 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Sibbald "European Ban on Bovine Growth Hormones Should Continue: Expert," *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal* 21 September 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Sibbald.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel S. Epstein, M.D., *The Politics of Cancer Revisited* (New York: East Ridge P, 1998) 597-598.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel S. Epstein, M.D., 598.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel S. Epstein, M.D., 634-635.

<sup>7</sup> National Research Council, *Meat and Poultry Inspection: The Scientific Basis of the Nation's Program* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1985).