

## Nightmare germ: A look back at terrifying Mad Cow Epidemic that began in the 1980s

One of the most existentially frightening illnesses ever to be discovered was mad cow disease, a fatal prion-spread illness that appeared in animals in the 1980s and killed over 200 people during the height of the outbreak in the late 1990s. You don't hear much about mad cow today, but the threat still looms. Here's what happened to this nightmare germ.

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The original outbreaks of BSE spread far and wide due to industry practices that were especially common in the UK. Thanks to higher soybean costs in the region, many farmers fed their cows less pricey feed that could contain the brainy leftovers of other livestock, including possibly infected sheep and cows. People then got infected by eating meat infused with contaminated brain and spinal cord tissue from BSE cows. These transmission chains were aided by the fact that prions are naturally resistant to most routine forms of decontamination.

But as luck would have it, soybean and other feeds were plenty cheap elsewhere, including in the U.S, meaning this method never became popular worldwide. By the mid-1990s, the UK formally banned the practice, as did most every other country eventually.

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To date, only around 230 cases of vCJD from a dozen countries have been reported, mostly from the UK, with the peak of annual new cases in 1999.

[\*\*This is an excerpt. Read the original post here\*\*](#)