



Cheap Meat: An Accident Waiting to Happen

By Jo Robinson

The latest fiasco in the U.S. livestock industry is that thousands of hogs and chickens have been raised on feed contaminated with melamine, the same chemical that has sickened thousands of cats and dogs. According to the U.S.D.A., some meat from those hogs and chickens has already entered our food supply.

How did this happen? The story begins in China. Melamine is an inexpensive by-product of the coal industry. In a deceptive practice, some Chinese producers have been adding melamine to rice, wheat, and soy meal to make the products appear to contain more protein. (Melamine is not a protein and has no food value, but it is rich in nitrogen and mimics protein on standardized laboratory tests.) Melamine costs less than true sources of protein, so the manufacturer makes more money.

The story continues in the United States. In order to lower the cost of pet food production, U.S. companies have been importing cheap protein meal from China. The pet food manufacturers had no way of knowing that some of these products were spiked with melamine. The exact number of dead and sickened pets is unknown.

But how did melamine get fed to our pigs and chickens? A common cost-cutting practice in the livestock industry is to supplement animal feed with floor sweepings and other leftovers from pet food manufacturing plants. In recent months, however, some of the sweepings happened to be laced with melamine. In this serpentine fashion, a cost-cutting adulterant that was added to protein meal in China found its way into U.S. pet food, then U.S. livestock feed, and then the food on our dinner tables.

The F.D.A. and the U.S.D.A. do not foresee any health consequences from eating melamine-spiced pork and poultry. This may prove to be true. The family pets that died ate the melamine itself; we are eating chickens and pigs that ate the melamine, diluting its concentration.

We may have dodged the bullet this time, but as long as we continue to raise our livestock on a least-cost basis, our health is at risk. For example, many cost-cutting practices lower the nutritional value of our meat. Research shows that the nearly universal practice of fattening cattle on straw and grain instead of fresh pasture gives us beef that is higher in total fat and lower in antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids. The practice causes no immediate harm, but our health may suffer over the long term.

Some cost-cutting strategies are deadly. In the 1980s and 90s, feedlot managers tried to save money by feeding cattle scraps back to cattle. The tragic result was mad cow disease. Eating meat contaminated with trace amounts of melamine may cause little or no harm. Eating just one serving of beef from a mad cow can kill you.

Adding more governmental oversight is a stop-gap solution. We need a sea change in the way we raise our livestock. We need to raise the animals on their native diets or on quality ingredients that match their original diets as closely as possible. When we feed wholesome feed to our animals, we can serve wholesome food to our families. We are what our animals eat.

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Jo Robinson is the originator and primary researcher of www.eatwild.com, a science-based website that details the benefits of raising animals on pasture. She is also the author of *Pasture Perfect, the Far-Reaching Benefits of Choosing Meat, Eggs, and Dairy Products from Grass-fed Animals*.