What is Mad Cow Disease?

‘Mad Cow Disease’ is the term commonly used for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE). It is a disease found in cattle that attacks the brain, destroying it and leading to the death of the animal.

The time from when an animal becomes infected to the time it starts to show symptoms of the disease is called the ‘incubation period’. The incubation period for BSE is two to eight years.

Once the animal becomes ill its health deteriorates until it either dies of the disease or is killed. This can take any amount of time from two weeks to six months.

Most of the infected cows in the UK have been between three and six years old.

The disease causes damage to the brain cells which take on a sponge-like appearance. This physical damage results in loss of co-ordination, dementia, and, eventually, death.

There is strong evidence that the disease may be caused by prions. Prions are a mutated form of a normal protein. They destroy the brain cells.

Prions are not easily killed by cooking or freezing and can survive for a very long time outside the body. The carcasses of infected cows need to be destroyed by intense heat to destroy the prions.

Cows became infected after parts from infected sheep, and in particular their brains, were used as an ingredient in some cow feed.

It is thought that prions transferred from animals to humans as a result of humans eating animal products from infected cows. This caused a disease called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD).

vCJD destroys the brain tissue and the nervous system. People who have been infected suffer from trembling muscles, muscle spasms, loss of memory, dementia and then death. There is no cure for vCJD.

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