

The reality of fast food meat



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According to Eric Schlosser author of *Fast Food Nation*, “Fast food has had an enormous impact not only on our eating habits but on our economy, our culture, and our values”(3). According to Lois Williams on any given day, about one quarter of U. S. adults visit a fast-food restaurant. The typical American now eats about three hamburgers each week (2). Schlosser also writes that “thirty years ago Americans spent about six billion dollars annually on fast food. In 2000 they spent over one-hundred and ten billion dollars, more than on higher education, personal computers, or new cars (3).

The reality of fast food is regarding the spreading and feeding of illness and disease; as well as the inhumane treatment of animals through modern meat farming practices. Our society imagines images of happy animals living on farms where the cows graze in lush green fields and the chickens run around as they please. This vision of free-roaming animals living out their days in sunny fields is very far from the reality. A majority of the animals that are raised for food live miserable lives in dark and overcrowded facilities. These facilities are commonly called “factory farms”(Maguire 5).

Factory farming began in the 1920s soon after the discovery of vitamins A and D. Shirley Leung said, when these vitamins are added to feed, animals no longer require exercise and sunlight for growth (B2). This allowed large numbers of animals to be raised indoors year-round. The greatest problem that was faced in raising these animals indoors was the spread of disease, which was fought against in the 1940s with the development of antibiotics. Farmers found they could increase productivity and reduce the operating costs by using machines and assembly-line techniques. Unfortunately, this

trend of mass production has resulted in incredible pain and suffering for the animals.

Animals today raised on factory farms have had their genes manipulated and pumped full of antibiotics, hormones, and other chemicals to encourage high productivity. In the fast food industry, animals are not considered animals at all; “ they are food producing machines” (Baldwin). They are confined to small cages with metal bars, ammonia-filled air and artificial lighting or no lighting at all. They are subjected to horrible mutilations: beak searing, tail docking, ear cutting and castration. The worst thing is that humans consume these products everyday in a so called “ Happy meal.” Far too many people close their minds and their consciousness to the situation. Instead they literally feed their own bodies with disease and support this inhumane treatment of animals.

Despite new federal safety regulations, more than one-hundred million pounds of meat has been recalled since 1998 due to suspected bacterial contamination. And just last summer, the nation’s largest meat processor had to recall five-hundred thousand pounds of beef contaminated with bacteria from seventeen states (Maguire 5). Have dramatic changes in the U. S. meat industry compromised the overall safety of American beef?

McDonald’s, which is only one of many different fast food industries, uses 2.5 billion pounds of this chicken, beef and pork annually. Perhaps, the most interesting question that I am sure most Americans have never asked themselves while stuffing a delicious juicy Big Mac into their mouth, is where the meat in the burger came from? How often do you think about the origin of the food you eat every day? What do you know about those six billion

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cows, chickens, and other animals who are only brought into this world to be enslaved and slaughtered each year in order to make an extra buck satisfy your appetite?

Big Macs, Quarter Pounders, Double Cheeseburgers and any other burgers sold at fast food restaurants, are made of the ground up flesh of a cow. This cow was taken from its mother at birth and raised either for slaughter or milk production. A male calf raised for slaughter has his testicles and horns removed by painfully brutal methods. He is also repeatedly branded, all with no type of pain killers. In addition, he is crowded with other calves in a feedlot with pools of manure, allowed little exercise, and fed an unnatural diet to fatten more quickly. This diet is usually due to a rise in grain prices which has encouraged the feeding of less expensive materials to cattle, especially substances with a high protein content that accelerate growth. Currently the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations allow dead pigs and dead horses to be rendered into cattle feed, along with dead poultry (Hamilton).

The regulations not only allow cattle to be fed dead poultry, they allow poultry to be fed dead cattle. According to a documentary on these cattle, Alec Baldwin states that “ the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) allows cattle with cancerous lesions and puss filled wounds to be approved for slaughter therefore, injuries and illnesses go untreated” (Baldwin).

A female cow, which is also known as a dairy cattle is sent to a dairy farm to produce milk. She is confined to an indoor stall where she is treated as a milk machine rather than a live animal. Dairy cattle are also impregnated

annually in order to keep the milk flowing. They are hooked up to machines that injure them and often times milked about three times a day. Injuries from the machines usually allow puss from lesions to mix in with our milk. After five to six years, she is slaughtered and her flesh is ground into hamburger: your Big Mac. “ More than one-hundred thousand of these cattle are unable to walk off the truck sent to the slaughter house, however they are still slaughtered for human food anyway” (Baldwin).

The recent changes in how cattle are raised, slaughtered, and processed have created an ideal means for pathogens to spread. Pathogens are an agent that causes disease, especially a living microorganism such as a bacterium, virus, or fungus (“ Pathogens”). The problem begins in today’s feedlots. A feedlot is where the cattle are fed and raised (“ Feedlot”). A government health official who was interviewed for an article in the Wall Street Journal by Shirley Leung, and preferred not to be named, compared the sanitary conditions in a modern feedlot to those in a crowded European city during the Middle Ages. These were the times when people dumped their chamber pots out the window, raw sewage ran in the streets, and epidemics raged (B2). The cattle now packed into feedlots get little exercise and live in pools of manure.

Feedlots have become an extremely efficient mechanism for “ recirculating the manure,” which is unfortunate, since *Escherichia coli* O157: H7 or *E. coli* can replicate in cattle troughs and survive in manure for up to ninety days (Leung B2). Schlosser defined *E. coli* as “ a mutated version of a bacterium found abundantly in the human digestive system. The *E. coli* bacteria in our digestive system help the body synthesize vitamins and ward off dangerous

organisms. E. coli, on the other hand also, releases a powerful toxin that can destroy the lining of the intestine” (199). In most cases, people have very bad cramps which then leads to bloody diarrhea. “ In about four percent of the cases, the toxins produced by E. coli enter the bloodstream, interfering with kidney function and causing Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS)” (Schlosser 199). Children and the elderly are the most vulnerable to developing HUS – although perfectly healthy adults can develop it, as well.

The illness can cause kidney failure, anemia, internal bleeding and the destruction of vital organs (Schlosser 199). It can cause anyone to suffer seizures or strokes, or to lapse into a coma (Schlosser 199). The painful and debilitating symptoms of the illness may last for weeks. About five percent of the people who develop HUS are killed by it. Those who survive often have permanent disabilities, such as blindness or brain damage (Schlosser 200). E. coli is now the leading cause of kidney failure among American children. Far from their natural habitat, the cattle in feedlots become more prone to all sorts of illnesses. And what they are being fed often contributes to the spread of disease to the slaughter houses.

The slaughterhouse tasks most likely to contaminate meat are the removal of an animal’s hide and the evisceration of its digestive system. A hide is basically the skin of the cattle and removal of the evisceration of its digestive system means to clean out its bowels. The hides are now removed by machine but if a hide has not been cleaned well first, pieces of dirt and manure may fall from it onto the meat. Stomachs and intestines are still pulled out of cattle by hand however, if the job is not performed carefully, the contents of the digestive system may spill everywhere. Since workers

are being rushed they are bound to make mistakes. The consequences of one error are quickly multiplied. Knives are supposed to be cleaned and disinfected every few minutes, something that workers tend to forget.

According to Steven Bjerklie, editor of *The Meat Processing Journal* “ If a knife gets contaminated, then it’s just going to spread that contamination to everything it touches” (101). The causes of food poisoning is usually full of scientific terms that nobody understands. However, behind them all lies a simple explanation for why most people get sick: There is feces on the meat.

In January 1993, doctors at a hospital in Seattle noticed that a large number of children were being admitted with bloody diarrhea. Some were suffering from HUS. Health officials soon traced the outbreak of food poisoning to under-cooked hamburgers served at Jack in the Box restaurants (Santora B1). The hamburgers contained a potentially lethal microbe: E coli. Jack in the Box issued an immediate recall of the contaminated ground beef, which had been supplied by the Vons Co. in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, “ more than 700 people in five different states got sick by Jack in the Box hamburgers, about 195 were hospitalized, and four died” (Santora B1). Most of the victims were children.

Jack in the Box accepted responsibility for their medical costs, and the chain was nearly destroyed by the publicity surrounding the outbreak. But this was not the first outbreak of E. coli linked to fast-food hamburgers. As Nichols Fox reveals in her book on food-borne pathogens, “ dozens of children got sick in 1982 by contaminated McDonald’s hamburgers in Oregon and Michigan (78). The only difference is that McDonald’s had quietly cooperated with

investigators , providing ground-beef samples that proved to be tainted with E. coli . In public, however, the McDonald's Corp. denied that its hamburgers were responsible for any illnesses.

In the five years since the Jack in the Box outbreak, about one- hundred thousand Americans, the majority of them children, have been made seriously ill by E. coli. Every week, on the average, a few Americans die from eating hamburgers. Antibiotics have proven ineffective in treating illnesses caused by E. coli . Some evidence indicates that treatment with antibiotics actually makes these illnesses worse. At the moment, it is said that little can be done for people with HUS, aside from the provision of fluids, transfusions and dialysis (Hamilton). E. coli infections are very easy to transmit. In order to be infected by most food-borne pathogens, you have to consume a fairly large dose most of the times thousands or even millions of organisms. However, an infection with E. coli can be caused by as few as ten organisms.

The microbe can survive on counter tops for days and in moist environments for weeks. Children have been infected by hand-to-mouth contact, by swimming in a contaminated water park and by crawling on contaminated carpeting at a day-care center. A microscopic particle of uncooked hamburger tainted with the bug is enough to kill you. Although outbreaks of E. coli have been linked to lettuce, alfalfa sprouts and apple cider, cattle manure has ultimately been the cause of most infections. Cattle seem to be the primary host for the microbe; it thrives in their digestive systems without making the animals sick. A recent study of cattle manure at one feedlot found that about 1. 6 percent of the samples carried E. coli (Hamilton).

Given that rate of infection, perhaps five cattle bearing the microbe are eviscerated at a large slaughterhouse every hour. The centralization and concentration of beef processing has spread E. coli far and wide. Steven P. Bjerklie, the former editor of Meat and Poultry, believes that “ the structure of this industry beautifully assists in the contribution to massive contamination of ground beef” (97). A single large plant can produce eight-hundred thousand pounds of hamburger meat daily and just one animal infected with E. coli can contaminate thirty-two thousand pounds of that meat. Because of the way ground beef is made today a single fast-food hamburger now contains the meat of anywhere from forty to one hundred different cattle, raised in as many as half a dozen different countries (Hamilton).

Chicken McNuggets come from even more badly abused animals. Perhaps, “ the most abused animals on the face of the earth” (Baldwin). The day that they hatch from their eggs, newborn chicks are shipped in crates to factory farms, where they are greeted by having part of their beaks chopped off with a hot metal blade. Chickens are crowded in small cages, cooped by the tens of thousands unable to move around freely. They never see daylight or feel fresh air. These conditions cause extreme distress, and drive the chickens berserk. Many chickens have their feather removed, and hair burnt off while often still alive. Some of the chickens grow so large so fast that their own legs can not hold them up, in result they starve to death because they are unable go to the feeding buckets.

The cause of this is from being genetically manipulated and being given growth promotion antibiotics. In livestock, these antibiotics are laced into

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animal feed in low doses to make animals grow faster. According to Shirley Leung, a writer for the Wall Street Journal “ Roughly 20 million pounds of antibiotics are given each year to U. S. cattle, pigs, and chickens. Many of the drugs are administered routinely to healthy livestock solely as a preventive measure and to promote growth” (B2). Farmers can buy many livestock antibiotics without a prescription. The McDonald’s policy doesn’t restrict the use of antibiotics in livestock . By one recent estimate, more than 70 percent of all antibiotics used in the U. S. are fed to healthy farm animals (Leung B2). According to Shirley Leung’s article in the Wall Street Journal, “ based on the growing body of evidence, the American Medical Association and more than 275 other groups have called for an end to the routine use of medically important antibiotics in healthy food animals (B2).

There are many human health concerns. If livestock and poultry are fed low doses of antibiotics routinely, bacteria may develop that are resistant to the drugs and be transferred to people through improperly prepared food. Some of the antibiotics used in agriculture are also used to treat illnesses in humans. As a result, this practice may contribute to the development of a resistance to antibiotic bacteria that pose a threat to human health. The increase in antibiotic-resistant bacteria is kept track of very well in the scientific community.

Before Chicken McNuggets, which were introduced in 1983, most chickens in the US were sold whole. Today, 90 percent of chicken is cut up, much is precooked in oil, and chicken companies, like beef producers, have turned to low-skilled workers (Sparke 54). Chicken McNuggets are made from pieces of reconstituted chicken breast that are held together by stabilizers, breaded,
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fried, frozen, and then reheated,). They became wildly popular among young children and those adults who believed them to be healthier than burgers. In fact, according to Amanda Sparke, " McNuggets contain twice as much fat per ounce as hamburgers and are fried in hydrogenated vegetable oils containing high amounts of trans fatty acids, a culprit behind heart disease (54).

Medical studies show that the consumption of animal products is a major contributor to much of the heart disease and cancer which your older family members may already suffer from. In addition to the harmful cholesterol which occurs naturally in all animal flesh, meats contain various pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, and tranquilizers which are fed to factory farm animals. Are you sure you want to take these substances into your body?

The hamburger has become our national food: Americans eat more meat than any other people in the world, and according to Lois Williams " the average person devours three hamburgers a week" (2). Studies found that one-third of US children eat fast food everyday (Lois 2). Which means that the spread of this fast food epidemic will continue to grow with the years to come. If you feel disturbed by these things, consider why you eat fast food and then ask yourself is it worth it? Cows and chickens are bred to be enslaved, tortured, and slaughtered. You make yourself prone to different diseases, pathogens, and growth inducing antibiotics, all because you buy these products. Each Fast food customer creates a market for these products.

These are two courses of action that you can take in order to save lives, the lives of humans as well as animals. First of all you can omit or reduce your consumption of fast food. Your most direct connection with factory farming is your cheeseburger and small fry. And a well-balanced vegetarian diet is the most healthful diet possible anyway. Second, you can be heard. Ask the manager of any McDonald's where their beef and chickens come from, and express your concern about how the animals are raised. You should know the reality of what really lurks behind your next double cheeseburger, because as Eric Schlosser stated: " You are what you eat" (10).

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