What Are You Really Eating for Dinner?

When the table is set for dinner, and steak is placed on the plate, it is a good bet that no one thinks about what the cow ate when it was alive. It is a better bet no one thinks about what went in to the cow’s feed. Here is a frightening statistic, according to Gardiner Harris, a columnist for the New York Times, “about 80 percent of antibiotics sold in the United States are used in animals.” As awful as that sounds, it gets worse. Gardiner says, “80 percent of antibiotics used on farms are given through feed.” So not only do farmers overuse antibiotics on animals, but they also feed it to these animals, whereby it gets absorbed into their system and into the meat produced from them. Antibiotics are just one of the many different components of “feed” for animals. This begs the question, what does actually go into the feed of the meat we eat? It ranges from antibiotics to chopped up chicken parts. What farmers feed their livestock is grossly influencing the world around us: the health of the animals we eat is failing, the ecosystem is crumbling from the crops we use to feed our animals, and people are dying from the misuse of antibiotics and hormones in feed.

First, livestock are fed hormones to produce growth, but the negative effects of using hormones are troubling. “Two-thirds of American cattle,” according to sustainabletable.org are, “raised for slaughter today are injected with hormones.” Hormones are also given to dairy cows to increase production of milk. These hormones are both artificial and natural, but neither should be administered to these animals. Potential health risks stem from hormone fed beef. If a
pregnant woman or a child is overexposed to these hormones, normal development could be prohibited in the child, and young women could reach puberty early, which is a potential risk for cancer. The hormone given to dairy cows is rBGh. This hormone is used to make milk production in dairy cows grow immensely. However, cows fed this hormone can develop the disease mastitis, inflammation of the udder, and increase the amount of births of deformed calves. Because these cows produce more milk, excessive amounts of nutrients are depleted from their body. This makes them more susceptible to outbreaks of diseases and deformities. Hormones in the beef and milk we eat are both killing off, and helping, infection grow in our livestock, and is potentially causing developmental problems in humans.

A major factor in the problem is farmers put into the feed, food that is not meant to be digested by the animals, which eat it. The most common form of this practice is feeding corn to beef cattle. Cattle as a species have been shaped by evolution, and are meant to eat grass. Their stomachs are designed to digest grass, which is the easiest and healthiest diet for them to digest. However, on factory farms, cows are fed corn and soy, among other grains. Cattle cannot digest grains easily, and, therefore, this causes them to get sick and develop problems such as “liver abscesses and sudden death syndrome,” according to sustainabletable.org. Eating grass has the complete opposite affect on cows. They are more healthy, lean, and rich in omega-3s and E vitamins. Yet, farmers continue to feed grains to our cattle. Besides grain, farmers put into the feed what they call “filler,” which can consist of grinded up unused chicken parts, candy, manure, and even meat from their own species.

Although problems with feed for cows are highly publicized, other animals are affected too. Pigs, another common factory farm animal, are legally fed garbage in some states. It is common sense; eating garbage is not healthy for these pigs. They develop a number of diseases
from this practice, which can spread to humans. Poultry, too, are affected. They are fed arsenic to make them grow, but it is poisonous, and gets into their meat and feces. When factory farms make pigs, chickens, and cows eat grains, such as corn, and also by-products and garbage, then our supply of food is threatened, forcing endless and avoidable disease in herds according to Sustainabletable.org. Unless we start letting our animals eat freely on a pasture, they will continue to get sick and die.

To combat infectious disease in the farm animals, which develop from feeding them food they should not be eating, farmers dump antibiotics into the feed of livestock. As mentioned earlier, 80 percent of America’s antibiotics are given to farm animals (Harris), and most of them are dumped into the feed of these animals. Livestock should not be fed antibiotics, but because the feed livestock eat is full of indigestible material, they get sick and need to be fed the antibiotics. Another reason they are fed antibiotics is to make them grow faster. These may not seem like serious problems on the surface, but the antibiotics mixed into feed are absorbed into the meat of the livestock. When the meat absorbs the antibiotics, and is eaten by humans, a tolerance to antibiotics is built up in humans (see Fig. 1). The tolerance to these antibiotics in humans is a severe situation. Because of the tolerance, some people’s bodies cannot fight infection because they have a built up tolerance to the antibiotic.

Figure 1. A simple diagram that displays how antibiotics can end up in humans. [http://healthylifedr.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/antibiotics-food-chain.gif](http://healthylifedr.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/antibiotics-food-chain.gif)
that would heal them. The worst outcome of this situation is, without the help of the antibiotics, a person dies from infection. Because farmers are dumping antibiotics into the feed of their livestock, every time meat is eaten from an animal fed with antibiotics, a tolerance to them is built up. The major human health complications from feeding our animals antibiotics should not be ignored, and should be addressed. Presently, the FDA is forcing farmers to obtain a prescription for antibiotics to assist with stopping this practice. However, this is only the first step if we want to truly eradicate antibiotics in the feed of livestock.

Knowing corn makes most livestock sick, especially cattle, it seems odd that farmers continue to feed livestock grains. Therefore, it begs the question, why do they feed them corn. The reason is money. Corn currently is the cheapest feed item on the market. As a country, the United States indirectly promotes the use of corn in feed because it subsidizes the crop. In an article published in the New York Times, Michael Pollan, a renowned food author, explains the severity of the issue:

One need look no further than the $190 billion farm bill President Bush signed last month to wonder whose interests are really being served here. Under the 10-year program, tax-payers will pay farmers $4 billion a year to grow ever more corn, this despite the fact that we struggle to get rid of the surplus the plant already produces. The average bushel of corn (56 pounds) sells for about $2 today; it costs farmers $3 to grow it . . . insuring the zea mays dominion over its 125,000-square-mile America habitat will go unchallenged.

Taxpayers, according to Pollan, are essentially paying for their meat to be fed the indigestible corn. Subsidizing corn is actually causing damage to the health of animals, and to the health of humans. Instead of promoting free-range feeding, and devising a plan to use the corn we grow
effectively, the government subsidizes the product. This starts a chain reaction: corn finding its way into feed, making animals wrought with disease, promoting the use of antibiotics in their feed, and finally building up a tolerance of life-saving drugs in humans. Newer laws and initiatives should be taken to stop the promotion of corn. Doing this will not only help stop the practice of feeding livestock indigestible food — which can help save both animal and human lives — but also help make corn a crop worth growing for farmers to make money.

The use of corn in the feed of livestock is detrimental to both the health of the livestock and humans, but by overgrowing corn in the United States, the ecosystem is hurting too. Corn grown today in the United States is a GMO, or genetically modified organism. GMOs are created to be disease resistant, pesticide resistant, and with the hope to rid the world of hunger. According to Naturalnews.com, as of 2009, genetically-modified corn grown with bacillus thuriengensis, a gene that repels insects, accounts for about 85 percent of the total United Sates crop. The kernels, which come from this corn, have the pesticide Cry1Ab built into them. The genetically built-in chemicals and pesticides in this corn, are affecting the environment around it. Besides the kernels of corn themselves, all the by-products of this corn has pesticide in it too. After this corn is harvested, and the husks are carried away by rain or snow, the pesticide washes into nearby rivers. Pesticides in river water can affect the environment around it by killing off certain species of bugs and plants along the river. By killing the smallest of bugs and plants, farmers can offset the ecosystem so badly, that it crumbles. Fueling ourselves as a species has become more complicated than in the past.

In conclusion, what you put on the table, and eat, is hurting the lives of animals, humans, and the environment. Feeding our livestock hormones, and food that is indigestible for them, is causing serious health issues in these animals. Because the livestock is becoming more infected
and sicker by the day, farmers use antibiotics to fight infection, and use them to make the livestock grow faster. The chain continues and directly affects humans, who eat meat, containing antibiotics, leading to a tolerance to these life-saving drugs. It would seem logical to stop this practice, but because corn is cheap and subsidized, farmers continue to use it, and the genetically modified corn they are using is slowly deteriorating the environment around us.

What makes its way into the food on our dinner plate is extremely frightening, but if farmers and the world turn to sustainable ways of feeding animals, not only would the animals, and the humans that eat them, be healthier, but also the world around them.
Works Cited


