



Summary of SEAC discussion of vertebral column: age at which specified risk material

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The Food Standards Agency asked the UK Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) to review an assessment of the BSE exposure risk from vertebral column¹. This risk assessment quantified the infectivity predicted to enter the human food chain over a year as a result of making vertebral column specified risk material (SRM) at the age of 12 months instead of 30 months.

SEAC was content with the approach used and assumptions made in the risk assessment. The committee noted that some uncertainties remained with regard to the extent of the species barrier between cattle and human. Nevertheless, even using the most pessimistic assumption (ie. low species barrier), the overall conclusions would not be significantly altered. It was also noted that the assessment included a pessimistic assumption about the levels of infectivity entering the food chain from residual dorsal root ganglia associated with vertebral column.

The committee considered that the human health risk from vertebral column in under thirty month cattle was now very small. The difference in risk from vertebral column as SRM at 12 as opposed to 30 months of age was negligible. It was noted that average risks were calculated for the entire UK population. The risks to any subpopulation consuming large amounts of UK beef on the had not been specifically considered. Data on specific groups who might consume significant amounts of beef on the bone were not available. Nevertheless, although exposure would be higher in any such group than assumed in the assessment, it was considered that the risk to this population group is still likely to be very small.

¹ DNV Consulting (2005). Assessment of Risk from Under Thirty Month Beef-on-the Bone: Report for the Food Standards Agency.

In summary, the human health risk from vertebral column in under thirty month cattle is now very low, and the difference in risk from vertebral column as SRM from 30 months or 12 months is very small, verging on negligible, even for any subgroup of individuals who may consume much of the current supply of beef on the bone.