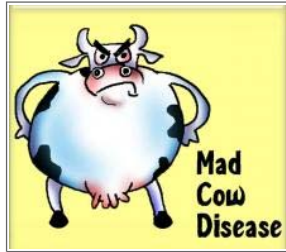


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Fears Over VCJD Infection

Submitted by Henry Aaron on 2009, December 18 - 13:59 [Featured News](#) [Health](#)



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An unusual case of variant CJD, the human form of 'mad cow disease' has once again revived fears that some people are still infected, with the symptoms yet to develop.

The genetic make-up of a 30-year-old man to die from vCJD suggests some cases have extremely long incubation periods, even spanning decades. If true, this means there could be a large number of infected people, who as young children ate beef contaminated with the cattle disease bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and acquired the disease, remaining unaware they have the condition.

Experts believe, whether, these individuals develop vCJD symptoms and die from the disease, depends on how long it takes to develop, as many of these infected individuals could also die from other causes before vCJD completes its incubation period.

In the 1990s, when fears of the 'mad cow disease' was at its height, amidst fears of a major epidemic claiming thousands of lives, with the disaster failing to materialize, only 200-cases of vCJD have been confirmed worldwide, since 1994.

There are 170-definite and probable cases of vCJD in the UK, including four victims who are still alive. To date, infected victims with vCJD have been found to have a particular homozygous form of MM, a human prion protein gene, with rogue prion proteins believed to be the infective agents of the disease.

The same gene is also able to take the form VV or MV, with the young man who died in January of the 'heterozygous' MV form of vCJD, suffering from symptoms of personality change, memory loss, unsteadiness and visual hallucinations.

Professor John Collinge, from London's Medical Research Council Prion Unit, points out related brain diseases have longer incubation periods in people with the heterozygous MV prion gene, including kuru, linked to cannibalism in Papua New Guinea, and CJD being triggered by growth hormone treatment.

Researchers writing in The Lancet medical journal say, some MV patients with kuru had been incubating the disease for over 50-years, causing scientists to suspect the MV gene might cause similar long incubation periods in people infected with vCJD.

The majority of the UK population have potentially been exposed to BSE prions, however, the extent of clinically silent infection remains unclear.

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