

# British doctors fear mother has passed human BSE disease to baby

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Doctors in Britain are concerned that a 24-year-old mother has passed on the fatal human form of BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or “mad cow disease”) to her baby, now four months old.

Twenty-four hours after birth the baby was taken away because it was failing to feed and in need of help. The mother, who cannot be named for legal reasons, had originally been diagnosed as suffering from depression. Nurses became increasingly concerned as the mother's depression worsened and the baby reacted badly to tests. Two months after the birth, doctors carried out a brain scan on the mother and found the degenerative changes that are associated with the presence of variant Creutzfeldt Jacob Disease (vCJD), or human BSE.

Further tests confirmed the presence of the abnormal prions, the agent found in cattle with BSE. If it is confirmed that the baby has CJD, it will confirm what scientists have long feared—that the disease can be passed from mother to child. Initial tests on the child have found lesions and plaques similar to those found in adults with vCJD.

Already 51 people in Britain have died as a result of contracting vCJD through eating contaminated meat. More than a dozen people still living are exhibiting symptoms of the disease. If a mother can pass the disease on to her baby, these figures could rise dramatically. Not only does the threat of the disease hang over people who ate beef in the 1980s and early 90s, but it may have grave implications for future generations.

The young mother's illness has devastated her family. The woman's mother remarked, “We are just an ordinary family, but we're being destroyed by a man-made disease that should never have happened. She was always laughing, telling jokes and making friends

wherever she went. She was out most weekends, dancing or meeting people.”

Unlike many diagnosed late with the disease, the young mother knew she had vCJD early on. “She had twice told me she knows she has got mad cow disease and that she is going to die,” her mother said.

While not commenting on this particular case, vCJD expert Professor John Collinge said, “It was something that was always on the cards. Sheep scrapie, a similar prion disease, passes from ewes to their lambs. There is good evidence that in cattle about one in ten infected animals transmit the disease to a calf.”

Another disturbing aspect of the case is that the medical instruments used during the woman's delivery have been used on a further seven occasions, according to West Midlands Director of Health Dr. Rod Griffith. The prion agent can survive the sterilisation process. Griffith told BBC radio, “We know who the patients are, but no, we haven't got in touch with them because ethically it's not clear whether that's the right thing to do.” He said any risk of contamination was “vanishingly small”.

This was opposed by the German vCJD expert Roland Heynkes. “Is it really OK not to tell them, that they can live without this fear?” he asked. “But perhaps there may be many more patients with developing CJD who have been contaminated with surgical instruments. Contaminated surgical instruments may not be a problem for many British women, because they are already infected directly from cattle.”



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