

# Tuberculosis and the Food Supply

by Kevin Elfering, Minnesota Department of Agriculture

## **Q: Can I get tuberculosis from eating meat?**

It is important to realize that with today's modern food production methods, the meat that you buy in the grocery store comes from animals that are inspected by meat inspectors and veterinarians for disease. These inspections take place both before and after the animal is slaughtered. This practice was implemented in the early 1900's primarily to remove animals with tuberculosis from the food supply. Animals with evidence of tuberculosis (enlarged lymph nodes) are removed from the food supply and tested for tuberculosis.

## **Q: But what if a mistake is made and meat from an animal gets through into the grocery store?**

A: This is pretty unlikely, but even if by some chance an animal did slip through, getting tuberculosis from meat would be unlikely because the bacteria that causes tuberculosis is found in the lymph nodes and not in the muscle (meat). Even when tuberculosis was common in cattle (the early 1900's) few cases of tuberculosis in humans were thought to be caused by eating meat from animals with tuberculosis. This is NOT the case with drinking unpasteurized milk (see below). Additionally, adequate cooking (to 160 degrees F) kills the tuberculosis bacteria.

## **Q: What about milk?**

A: Milk purchased in the grocery store is free from tuberculosis because it is required by law to be pasteurized (heat treated to kill dangerous bacteria including tuberculosis). The main reason for requiring pasteurization of milk was because of tuberculosis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 20 to 40 percent of human tuberculosis cases in the 1900's resulted from drinking unpasteurized milk from cows with tuberculosis. It is important to note that the recent cases of tuberculosis in Minnesota animals are in beef cattle, NOT in dairy animals.

## **Q: What about unpasteurized milk?**

A: Although the recent cases of tuberculosis in Minnesota animals have been found only in beef cattle and NOT in dairy cows, it is still unwise for people to consume unpasteurized milk for a number of reasons. Numerous illness outbreaks have been associated with drinking unpasteurized milk. Especially troubling is the potential for children and the elderly to get infected with Escherichia coli O157:H7, by drinking unpasteurized milk. Although E. coli O157:H7 does not cause any illness in adult dairy cows, infection with this bacteria can be fatal for children and the elderly. Other types of bacteria can also be unapparent in cattle but cause severe disease in humans (Campylobacter and certain types of Salmonella).