



## 1. Was the animal raised on pasture? How was the animal raised?

When animals are raised on pasture or in fields, they graze outdoors. Cows belong to a group of animals called ruminants, and their stomachs are designed to digest grasses, so it's best to find farmers that let their cows out to pasture.

## 2. Was the animal fed anything else besides grass?

Find out if the farmer fed the animal any supplements, byproducts or additional types of feed. On factory farms, the animals might be fed such things as poultry manure and feathers, cement dust, rotten and outdated food, and other unsavory products.

Animals are also fed animal byproducts, even since the Mad Cow Disease discovery in the US. There are efforts to stop the loopholes where cows can be fed back to cows (as of June 2004, this was still being done in several ways). But even if all the loopholes are closed, other animals can still be ground up and fed to cows (who, remember, are vegetarians by nature). Supplements often contain animal fat and protein.

The only way to be sure there are no animal products in the feed being given to the animal is to know that the animal had a 100% vegetarian diet or was given 100% vegetarian feed, though, again, remember that a high amount of corn in the animal's diet can make it sick.

## 3. How was the animal finished?

"Finishing" is the process an animal goes through as it's being readied for slaughter. If an animal is finished on pasture, it means it ate grasses up until slaughter.

If an animal is finished on grain (corn is the hardest to digest), it means that for a certain amount of time before processing, it was fed grain. The grain gives the meat the marbling texture that most consumers are used to, but providing only grain to a cow can make it sick.

If the cow was finished on grain, you can also ask:

- a. How long was the animal finished on grain?
- b. Was it finished in a feedlot? If so, for how long?

The issue of finishing is complex because there are different beliefs among sustainable farmers. Some believe that animals should only be fed grasses because they can't digest grains properly. On factory farm feedlots, where animals eat only grains, animal byproducts and other unsavory substances, they often get sick because their stomachs can't properly digest the food.

Many sustainable farmers finish their animals on grain, but they employ what we call "grain supplemented." The animals are a mixture of grain and grasses – they are not forced to eat grain, but it is provided for them in small amounts in the field. The animals can eat as much grain as they want and will stop when they no longer wish to eat any. They are also given a controlled amount so they cannot overeat and make themselves sick. The farmer in no way forces the animals to eat grain, but they are fed it and do eat it. The farmers that employ this method say that their animals do not get sick.



Another question to consider is how old the animals were when they started eating grain. Many commercial feedlots feed corn to newly weaned calves whose stomachs are not mature enough to digest the grain. More sustainable finishers will wait until an animal is 14 to 18 months old before starting it on



grain. These finishers will also seek to provide a wider mix of grains, rather than give only the cheapest available (usually corn, which is harder to digest but tends to be very low cost).

The issue of a feedlot is also tricky – feedlots are where most animals go to for a short time before they are slaughtered. It's basically the holding pen before the animal goes to the processing plant. Some go for several days – others are there for 6 months. We believe that animals should not live in a feedlot at all, but some farmers have no choice except to send their animals to a feedlot for a certain amount of time since there are times of the year when grass is simply not available – even many “grassfed” beef cattle have spent a considerable portion of their lives in a feedlot eating hay. You have to decide what is acceptable for you – you might choose to only consume animals that were never in a feedlot, or you might be okay with one who held in a feedlot for a couple days, or longer if you know how they were treated while there.

The two important issues with feedlots are the density of animals and the type of feed used. If the animals are packed in together, where they spend their time standing in mud and their own feces, this is a factory farm feedlot and should be avoided. If the animals are fed animal byproducts, outdated food, grains and other unnatural products, they are not sustainable.

If you choose to purchase meat from an animal that never spent any time on a feedlot, look for meat that was 100% pastured raised. If you choose to purchase meat from an animal that spent a minimum amount of time on a feedlot, ask the farmer about the raising and finishing process for the animals, as well as what they were fed and how long the animals were in the feedlot.

#### 4. Was the animal ever given antibiotics?

Some consumers only want to eat meat that was never given antibiotics, even to treat illness. Other consumers are okay with the therapeutic

use of antibiotics, meaning that the animals are treated with antibiotics only if they get sick.

You need to decide which is best for you. Any animal fed a low-dose of antibiotics on a continual basis, either to promote growth or to ward off possible disease, is an unsustainable animal that was raised on a factory farm. This type of meat should be avoided.

#### 5. Were hormones, steroids or growth promoters ever given to the cow?

There is only one reason cattle are given hormones, steroids or any type of growth promoter - to make them grow faster. The practice of giving animals any type of growth promoter is not sustainable and should be avoided, so the answer to this question should be “no”.

Another type of hormone is given to dairy cows – rBGH. This genetically engineered hormone is injected for one reason only – to make the animals produce more milk. Cows given rBGH (or rBST) are not sustainable and their products should be avoided.

**NOTE:** Sustainable farmers are very open about how they raise their animals – If you're not on their farm asking these questions, ask to visit and see exactly how the animals are raised. The vast majority of farmers would love to have you stop by for a visit! Alternatively, if your meat came from a company that distributes products raised by family ranchers, ask for their written protocol (the standards for exactly how the animal was raised). If they won't, you might want to think twice about buying their products.