

Is it time to give up meat?



Recent studies show definitive link between meat consumption and cancer risk.

LET'S FACE IT, most of us know bacon is not the healthiest food. The same goes for jerky or bologna, for that matter. But to date, most reports link meat consumption and health risk have been softened with some element of doubt and recommendations to “consume in moderation.”

What has changed in recent months is the use of language that leaves no room for interpretation. Recent reports are clear – meat causes cancer. To be specific, processed meat causes colorectal cancer, and red meat is “probably carcinogenic” as well. And those who eat more of their meat grilled – red or white meat – have a higher risk of kidney cancer.

*People who eat
processed meat regularly
are 18% more likely
to be diagnosed with
colorectal cancer.*

LOOKING AT THE STUDIES

INTERNATIONAL AGENCY FOR RESEARCH ON CANCER

Processed meat causes cancer

In October, a report by the International Agency for Research on Cancer was released by the World Health Organization stating definitively that consumption of processed meats is “carcinogenic to humans,” causes colorectal cancer and is positively correlated with stomach cancer. (Processed meats are defined in the sidebar to the right.)

“For an individual, the risk of developing colorectal cancer because of their consumption of processed meat remains small, but this risk increases with the amount of meat consumed,” said Dr. Kurt Straif of the International Agency for Research on Cancer.

Consumption of red meat was also positively associated with pancreatic and prostate cancer.

The quantity of processed meat associated with this increased risk is also concerning, as it is an amount many do not consider excessive. Just two slices of bacon, or 1.8 ounces of processed meat a day, increases the risk of developing colorectal cancer by 18 percent.

And while not quite as definitive, the same report states that 3.5 ounces of red meat eaten daily is “probably carcinogenic” as well, raising the risk of colorectal cancer by 17 percent.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS MD ANDERSON CANCER CENTER STUDY

Grilling meat makes it carcinogenic

Just this month, another study from the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston linked meat consumption with kidney cancer. The study looked at 659 patients just diagnosed with kidney cancer and compared them to 699 similar people without cancer.

As reported in the journal *Cancer*, people who ate grilled meat of any kind faced the highest risk of kidney cancer. And those with two genetic mutations that already put people at higher risk of kidney cancer were most affected by the grilled meat risk. Those with kidney cancer in this study also ate fewer fruits and vegetables than people who didn't have it.

These findings further support earlier findings that burning or charring meat creates cancer-causing substances, and high consumption of well-done, fried or barbecued meats was associated with increased risks of colorectal, pancreatic and prostate cancer.



Processed meat is now considered carcinogenic along with things like tobacco and asbestos.

DEFINING WHAT WE EAT

RED MEAT: unprocessed mammalian muscle meat—for example, beef, veal, pork, lamb, mutton, horse or goat meat.

PROCESSED MEAT: meat that has been transformed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking or other processes to enhance flavor or improve preservation. Processed meats may contain pork or beef.

WHAT NOW?

DEVELOPING AN APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO THESE FINDINGS

While this is somewhat unsettling for those of us who indulge in processed meat and red meat regularly, these findings are not considered new or surprising by leading health and research agencies. And while the conclusions are definitive, the risk is still somewhat limited. To put the numbers into perspective, the overall lifetime risk of someone developing colon cancer is 5 percent. The increased risk from eating the amount of processed meat in the study would raise average lifetime risk to almost 6 percent.

Yet who among us does not want to reduce our risk of developing cancer, or any disease, if we have the ability to do so?

INTERNATIONAL AGENCY FOR RESEARCH ON CANCER RECOMMENDATION

- Reduce the amount of beef, pork, lamb and other red meats in your diet
- Avoid processed meats
- Eat a healthy diet, stay active, maintain a healthy weight to reduce risk of a variety of cancers and other health problems

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY RECOMMENDATION

- Limit processed meat and red meat
- Eat a high ratio of vegetables, fruits and whole grains
- Avoid tobacco, get to and stay at a healthy weight, get regular physical activity
- Limit alcohol

Moderation remains key and, according to Colleen Doyle, MS, RD, American Cancer Society managing director of nutrition and physical activity, “The occasional hot dog or hamburger is okay.”

SOURCES

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Carson City, Nevada 89703

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