Can Daily Consumption of Meat Increase Colorectal Cancer Risk?

Even a moderate amount of red and processed meat was found to put people at risk for this cancer.

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For some time, cancer organizations have recommended diets that limit processed and red meat because consumption of these foods is linked to cancer. Now, a new study published in the International Journal of Epidemiology reveals that even folks who follow guidelines may have a slightly increased risk of developing colorectal cancer, reports Cancer Research UK.

Red meat includes pork, beef and lamb, while processed meats include bacon, some sausages, hot dogs and salami.

Department of Health guidelines in the United Kingdom suggest that people who eat more than 90 grams, or about 3.2 ounces, of red and processed meat a day should decrease the number of grams to 70, or about 2.5 ounces. (Seventy grams is the average daily consumption in the United Kingdom.) In the United States, the American Institute for Cancer Research recommends a limit of no more than about 2.5 ounces a day (about 70 grams).

For the study, scientists examined the diets of nearly half a million British men and women ages 40 to 69 over the course of more than five years. During that time, 2,609 developed colorectal cancer.

The highest intake group, or those who ate red and processed meat four or more times a week, consumed 76 grams a day. People who consumed that amount were 20% more likely to develop colorectal cancer than those who ate only about 21 grams a day.

Although 20% sounds like a lot, the absolute increased risk is actually quite small. BBC News reported that for every 10,000 people in the study who consumed 21 grams of red and processed meat daily, 40 were diagnosed with bowel cancer. Of those who ate 76 grams a day, the number was 48. That is, an additional eight people out of 10,000 would develop the disease.

One thing is clear, from this and earlier studies: Processed meats are riskier than unprocessed meats. The study found that the risk of developing colorectal cancer rises by 20% with every 25 grams of processed meat (a little less than 1 ounce of deli meats) consumed and by 19% with

every 50 grams of red meat (a little less than 2 ounces of roast beef) consumed.

Although previous findings suggest that every 50 grams of processed meat a person eats daily increases his or her bowel cancer risk, the results of this study lowered the number of grams to 25 a day.

“Our results strongly suggest that people who eat red and processed meat four or more times a week have a higher risk of developing bowel cancer than those who eat red and processed meat less than twice a week,” said coauthor Tim Key, Cancer Research UK’s expert in diet and deputy director at the University of Oxford’s cancer epidemiology unit.

According to Julie Sharp, Cancer Research UK’s head of health information, this doesn’t mean that people need to cut processed and red meat from their diets entirely. But she suggests that they reduce their intake of these meats.

“You could try doing meat-free Mondays, looking for recipes using fresh chicken and fish or swapping meat for pulses like beans and lentils in your usual meals,” she said.

Click here to learn how a healthy diet reduce colorectal cancer death risk.

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