Is Eating Red Meat Healthy––or Not?

A new study discredits decades of research suggesting eating beef and bacon is bad for us. But some researchers aren't buying it.

October 8, 2019 By Casey Halter

For years, medical and nutrition experts have warned people to limit their red meat intake to cut their risk for cancer, cardiovascular disease and other illnesses. But a new report published this week in the Annals of Internal Medicine claims that's wrong, potentially upending decades of research on the topic.

Published by a team of 14 researchers, the controversial new report suggests that there is in fact, no health reason to eat less red meat––even the processed stuff like bacon and salami. The conclusion by the panel of researchers challenges those of dozens of national and international health groups, including the World Health Organization, American Heart Association (AHA) and the U.S. government's dietary guidelines panel.

For the report, researchers focused only on large cohort studies and randomized control trials––dismissing all animal studies or research focused on observational or self-reported data.

This stricter scientific approach, called GRADE, or the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development, and Evaluation, is endorsed by over 100 medical organizations for its accuracy. However, it is a relatively new approach to evaluating nutrition research, which study authors noted is likely why its findings are so different from other research on nutrition.

Ultimately, they concluded that even the best evidence connecting red meat to cancer, heart disease and overall mortality was of "low certainty." In fact, authors of the new study argue that people can "continue their current consumption of both unprocessed red meat and processed meat," with no ill effects.

Already, the findings have prompted fierce criticism from health groups that have argued for years that people should curtail their red meat consumption—especially, processed meats. The American Cancer Society, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, the AHA and the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) have all publicly objected to the series of systematic reviews. (An op-ed in The New York Times added kindling to the fire of controversy by reporting that the study's lead author has past financial ties to the meat and food industry.)

Critics discredit the research for a number of reasons. First, it ignores numerous studies showing

meat's links with poor health, discounts compounding lifestyle factors and excludes important and relevant evidence based on technicalities. In a statement, Nigel Brockton, PhD, vice president of research at AICR, reiterated, "We stand by the rigor of our research methodology and our Cancer Prevention Recommendation that people should limit red meat intake to less than 12 to 18 ounces per week and avoid processed meat."

Researchers are also concerned over the series' omission of meat's real and potential environmental impacts on climate, water, land and pollution, which are directly linked to cancer and others diseases as well as mortality.

For more information about the links between red meat and cancer, click here.

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