

# Is red meat healthy?

RED MEAT HAS HAD A DIFFICULT TIME OF IT LATELY. RESEARCH WARNING OF THE DANGERS OF EATING TOO MUCH HAS LEFT MANY OF US PRODDING OUR PORK CHOPS WITH SUSPICION AND QUESTIONING IF WE 'HAVE A BEEF' WITH OUR BEEF. BUT CAN RED MEAT FORM PART OF A HEALTHY DIET? **ANNA-MARIE CASAS** FINDS OUT

**Red meat, a food source devoured since our cavemen forefathers first discovered its delights, has caused much divisive debate in recent times. Hardcore carnivores continue to declare undying love for their juicy steaks while the anti-flesh fraternity signal that red is dead.**

**In 2015, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said that red meat was probably carcinogenic and that we should reduce our intake if we eat a lot. It denounced processed meats - those preserved**



## Our Experts



Dr Emma Derbyshire is a public health nutritionist and spokesperson for the Meat Advisory Panel offering information about meat in a balanced diet.



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**by smoking, curing or salting - as increasing the risk of cancer, to be consumed only on occasion.**

**This has prompted serious food for thought. Half of us, according to market research company Kantar Worldpanel, have already turned 'flexitarian'. Not prepared to go the full hog in ditching meat completely, we're going vegetarian a couple of days a week in a bid to stay healthy.**

**However, surely, it's just about moderation and how you eat it?**

## HEALTHY PORTIONS

"Having more than 50 grams of processed red meat a day was shown to increase the risk of some cancers," observes registered dietitian Priya Tew, spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association. "However, that doesn't mean you need to stop eating foods like

sausages, ham and bacon entirely, just keep them to occasional foods."

Indeed, red meat, which includes beef, lamb, pork, veal, venison and goat, has many health benefits.

It is one of the best sources of iron, essential for the formation of red blood cells, and zinc, which helps the body make new cells and enzymes. Protein-rich, red meat is a good source of B vitamins, particularly B12, which plays a key role in the normal functioning of the brain and nervous system.

Department of Health advice is to consume some meat or other sources of protein as part of a healthy, balanced diet, but it recommends that those eating more than 90g of red and processed meat a day (three slices of roast beef, lamb or pork) should cut down to 70g, the average daily UK consumption.

"A 70g portion is roughly the size of the palm of your hand, a deck of cards, or a standard mobile phone," explains public



health nutritionist Dr Emma Derbyshire, of the Meat Advisory Panel (MAP).

The World Cancer Research Fund recommends a weekly limit of 500g of cooked red meat (700 to 750g raw), equating roughly to five meals.

## RED ALERT

So, should we be concerned? Well, the WHO suggests that one in five bowel cancers - and three per cent of all cancers - are caused by red or processed meat with an estimated 40,000 new cases of bowel cancer diagnosed each year. High intakes have also been associated with heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Processed red meat was found to have the greatest link.

A new study in the medical journal, *Gut*, suggests that eating large amounts of red, unprocessed meat can increase the risk of the inflammatory bowel condition, diverticulosis.

But nutrition specialist Dr Laurretta Ihonor exercises caution. "It is important to remember that 'associations' unearthed by research are not proof of causation. In other words, just because there is a link between red meat and colon cancer, it does not mean that eating too much red meat will actually give a person cancer."

Priya agrees: "People with an increased risk may also be overweight, smoking and eating less fruit and veggies - all of which will also have an effect. There are lots of things that can increase your risk of cancers. It's all about perspective and moderation."

## EATING TOO LITTLE

And before you extend 'meat-free Mondays' to months, you should consider the risks of eating too little of the red stuff.

"Red meat is a valuable source of iron, so iron deficiency and anaemia can be potential risk factors when too little is eaten," explains Dr Derbyshire. "Low zinc intakes is another risk factor - zinc is an essential mineral that is needed in small amounts to maintain health and support important body functions each day.

She adds: "Interestingly, more than a quarter of women (27 per cent) aged 19 to 64 now fail to achieve minimum recommended intakes of iron and the latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey shows this high-risk group is eating an average of just 47 grams of red meat (cooked weight) per day."

And Dr Derbyshire cautions against cutting back as we get older. "We should be staying within the 500g per week guidelines. Sarcopenia - muscle wasting - is common with age, so it is important that



high quality protein is eaten to help sustain lean body muscle mass. For women, this should ideally be combined with some resistance activities."

But for those of us who have ditched red meat, how can we ensure that we are topping up levels of essential nutrients? There are good alternative sources, including poultry, pulses and green veg, according to Dr Ihonor. "A problem only arises if a person cuts red meat out and fails to substitute it for equally good sources of protein, iron and B12."

## THE CUTS ABOVE THE REST

So, which red meat cuts are the healthiest?

"Always opt for lean cuts of red meat," says Dr Derbyshire. "When selecting mince always look at the percentage of fat, especially if this needs to be monitored for your health. Choosing wafer thin ham, or 'thin' sausages can help you to enjoy red meat and fall easily within the weekly guidelines.

"Always look at the amount of visible fat (marbling) on meat when you buy it. Choose leaner cuts, or trim this off before cooking and eating. Sirloin tip side steak, top round roast and steak, bottom round roast and steak, and top sirloin steak are regarded as being particularly lean."

And you should also get savvy with your saveloys. "In this country, the majority of sausages are made using fresh meat and are not preserved in the same way products such as salami are preserved, says Dr Derbyshire. "Therefore, the majority of British sausages should not be classed as processed meat."

## COOK CAREFULLY

It's safe to serve steaks and other whole cuts of beef and lamb rare provided they have been properly sealed to kill bacteria on the meat's surface. Pork and some meat products like burgers require cooking thoroughly, but try not to over-do it.

Heating at high temperatures for long periods produces compounds associated with cancer, explains Dr Ihonor. Therefore, it is best to minimise meats that have been charred, grilled or barbecued on an open flame, or slow roasted.

Dr Derbyshire adds: "Using slow cookers is a great way to cook and enjoy the full flavours of red meat. Use barbecuing marinades, where possible, such as lemon juice, olive oil, vinegar and even beer/ales to help reduce levels of potentially harmful by-products produced from cooking this way."