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## Processed Meat and Cancer: The Science

In response to the headlines about processed foods and colorectal cancer, I decided to look at some of the research on cancer and colorectal cancer. Rather than write a long drawn-out article, I'm going to give you the bottom line on what I found.

- The risk of getting any type of cancer in a lifetime is one in two for men and one in three for women (1). The lifetime risk of getting colon cancer is 4.84% for men and 4.49% for women. If the risk is an average of 18% higher by eating processed meat on a regular basis as the report seems to suggest, that increases the lifetime risk to 5.71% in men and 5.30% in women. Divide that risk by an average lifespan of 80 years and the increased risk of getting colorectal cancer is low.
- The basis for the WHO recommendations was epidemiological studies, which cannot establish cause and effect. There are no randomized controlled studies in humans. Regardless of the headlines, the use of the word "cause" is incorrect; it's a contributing factor. That's all it is.
- Virtually every study used Food Frequency Questionnaires, the poorest form of collecting data on what people eat.



Here are some questions that must be considered and were not.

- What does the regular intake of cruciferous vegetables do to the risk of colon cancer?
- Or green leafy vegetables?
- Or citrus fruits?
- Or beans and legumes?
- Or 20 to 30 grams of fiber daily?

And on and on. We don't just eat a single food. They're not considering all factors that affect the overall risk of getting colorectal cancer.

Based on a study published this year, data from two longitudinal studies on medical professional groups found a 15% increased risk of colon cancer by eating one serving of processed meats per day. There was no further increased risk if the number of servings increased. There's a consistency in the increased risk across studies. That suggests there's some other factor or factors in play. Remember, not everyone who eats one serving of processed meat per day gets colon cancer, only about 15% do. What we really need to find out is what those other factors are. That's the role science should be playing in this. Not talking about causes when the word "causes" doesn't apply.

One final thought on this whole topic of processed meat and colorectal cancer. How much you eat is probably important for those who are at a higher genetic risk for getting colorectal cancer. If there's any validity to what the report may say, it's that we should follow two of my lifestyle recommendations: eat less and eat better. They haven't even considered exercise, so let's throw "move more" into the mix, because we know exercise has a positive effect on reducing the risk of all cancers. It's the total lifestyle that has to be considered, not just singling out this factor or that one.

But cutting back on processed meat certainly won't do any harm if that's your choice; it's one more way to shift the odds in your favor.

Eat less. Eat better. Move more. Remember that you read it here first.

What are you prepared to do today?

## **Dr. Chet**

### References:

1. American Cancer Society
2. PLoS ONE 10(8): e0135959. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0135959.

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