SPOTLIGHT ON MEAT

WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE ON MEAT AND CANCER MEAN FOR NEW ZEALANDERS?

The World Health Organisation's (WHO) agency for cancer, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) announced in 2015 that red meat was classified as a probable cause of cancer, and processed meat as a cause of cancer based on existing evidence.

This created much confusion at the time as the alarmist media coverage misinterpreted what these results meant in real life circumstances. So much so, the WHO had to release a new statement to clarify what it actually meant - we do not need to stop eating meat, rather reduce consumption to reduce the risk of colorectal cancer.

Fast forward to 2018, IARC are releasing the full monograph on red and processed meat, so it's worth recapping what the classification means.

HOW MUCH?

IARC did report a theoretical risk for every 50 grams of processed meat eaten, and 100g of red meat eaten, which equated to an overall increase in risk of 1% if everyone ate that amount every day. In New Zealand, that would mean we would all need to eat double the amount we are eating on average, every day, based on the findings from our last national nutrition survey. Current guidelines specify 500g cooked (about 750g raw) red meat/week, which includes beef, lamb, pork and fresh sausages.

Based on most recipes in New Zealand, this spreads across the week to about 4 meals, such as -

- TWO -
SLICES OF COOKED MEAT (100G)

- ONE -
PORTION OF SHEPHERD'S PIE WITH 100G LAMB MINCE

- ONE -
MEDIUM STEAK (150G)

- TWO -
PORK SAUSAGES (100G)

All served with a side of fibre-rich vegetables for a nutrient-dense meal.







AS THE SCIENCE COMMUNITY AGREE, WHEN IT COMES TO CANCER RISK, IT'S NOT ABOUT DEMONISING A SINGLE FOOD, IT'S THE WAY WE ARE LIVING OUR LIVES, AND ONE OF MODERATION.

THIS MEANS A COMBINATION OF:

- Being sun smart
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Not smoking
- Getting regular exercise
- Cutting down on alcohol

Eating a variety of nutrient dense foods from the four food groups (fruit and veges, wholegrains, dairy, and protein from plant and animal sources)

THESE WELLBEING LIFESTYLE CHOICES ALSO ALIGN WITH THE GUIDELINES FOR CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE AND DIABETES PREVENTION.

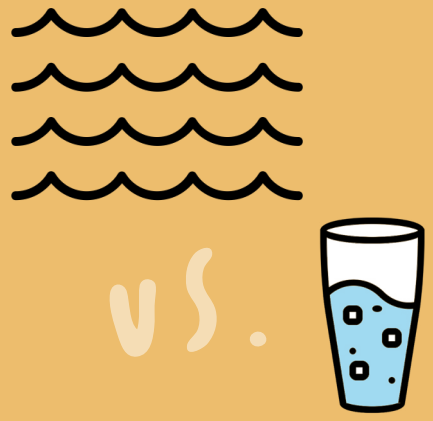
HOW MANY CAN YOU TICK?

HAZARD VS RISK

The IARC classification system is based on a hazard analysis, it does not tell us about the likelihood, or actual risk of something giving you cancer. Therefore, it is theoretical, and provides no context of real life circumstances about how potent something is in causing cancer.

When grouping other agents and activities in the same classification, such as smoking and sunlight with processed meat, and red meat with shift work, hairdressing, coffee and pickled vegetables, this creates confusion. This does not mean each are as bad as each other, rather what type of evidence is behind each exposure.

To explain, if we take an analogy of water – it is a potential hazard, but the level of risk depends on the quantity and circumstances. For example, jump into a deep lake with no lifeguards and the risk is high, and the risk of the water doing you harm is higher whereas there is little risk with drinking a glass of water.



RED MEAT PACKS A PUNCH OF NUTRITION

A 130 gram serving of beef or lamb is low in sodium and provides a natural and well absorbed dose of zinc, iron, vitamin B12 and protein – all contributing to feeling energised, focussed and immune-strong.



WEIGHING UP THE BENEFITS OF EATING MEAT

Health authorities including the World Health Organisation, World Cancer Research Fund, Cancer Society of New Zealand and the New Zealand Ministry of Health recognise meat has health benefits.

Red meat is included as a staple within healthy, balanced eating and lifestyle patterns.

For individual dietary advice,
see your local dietitian or registered nutritionist
dietitians.org.nz I nutritionsociety.ac.nz

For more information on reducing cancer risk
cancernz.org.nz

February 2018

References

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