

# Grill healthy, grill happy

May 23 2014, by Eric Peters

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Memorial Day is the unofficial start to summer and grilling season, so VCU News reached out to VCU Medical Center registered dietitians Jan Starkey and Mary-Jo Sawyer for a few tips on keeping a great American pastime healthy and happy.

## What kind of meat is best to buy?

"The American Institute of Cancer Research recommends limiting [red](#)

[meat](#) to less than 18 ounces per week and avoiding processed meats to help decrease cancer risk," Sawyer said. "Choosing more chicken and fish helps cut down on fatty or processed meats like ribs, sausages and hot dogs, but, if you have your mind set on red [meat](#), leaner cuts are available like London broil or filet mignon."

## **What is the best way to store meats and other items in coolers?**

"Use several coolers and pack them well with ice," Sawyer said. "Keep the meat tightly wrapped in a separate cooler to prevent raw juices from dripping onto other [food](#)."

Also put chilled beverages in a separate cooler because opening and closing the lid increases the temperature inside the cooler."

"Finally," Sawyer said, "transport coolers inside the car rather than in the trunk, and then keep them in the shade to keep the temperature as low as possible."

## **Is charring or burning the meat bad for you?**

"Yes," Starkey said. "Potentially cancer-causing compounds can form when fat from meat drips onto hot coals or the [grill](#) element, resulting in flames and charring. The wonderful tasting charring that forms on meat may contain PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons) and HCAs (heterocyclic amines) which have raised some health concerns."

"But the good news is that you can minimize your exposure to these compounds by following some of these suggestions:

- Clean the grill prior to cooking to remove any charred debris that

may stick to food.

- Precooking food prior to grilling will help cut down on PAHs. You can zap meat in a microwave up to 90 seconds which will reduce the grilling time.
- Try grilling more fish since beef, pork and poultry tend to form more HCAs.
- If you prefer meat or poultry, trim off fat to reduce the drippings and use thinner cuts which cook more quickly.
- Flipping food frequently may help reduce the formation of HCAs. Use a spatula or tongs instead of a fork to prevent juices from dripping.
- Consider putting smaller cuts of meat or fish on a skewer, which will reduce grilling time. Enjoy alternating small pieces of meat, scallops, shrimp or chicken with bell pepper and onion pieces, cherry tomatoes and small mushrooms.
- Marinate meats and poultry in beer or wine for several hours before cooking since this has been shown to significantly reduce the formation of HCAs. Other marinades include olive oil, soy sauce, vinegar, mustard, lemon juice, orange juice, garlic, salt, pepper, cooking wine, herbs and spices. Try rubbing rosemary onto meats before grilling. Studies have shown that rosemary inhibits the formation of HCAs, and other herbs may have similar effects. Sugary marinades such as barbeque sauce should be used only during the last minute or two of grilling because they tend to encourage charring. And remember to always marinate food in the refrigerator to keep bacteria levels low.
- Use charcoal briquettes which burn at a lower temperature or hardwood chips from hickory and maple which burn cooler.
- Remove food from the grill as soon as it's cooked.

You might also like to throw a few extra vegetables on the grill as these are not associated with the formation of HCAs or PAHs. Not only will grilled vegetables taste great, but they will add variety and color to your

plate and taste buds. Some of the best include tomatoes, onions, peppers, eggplant, zucchini and endive."

## **How long can food be left on the serving table? Can it be saved and eaten as leftovers?**

"Refrigerate foods within two hours of cooking," Starkey said. "You can also lengthen the time by putting foods on ice. In general, leftovers can keep up to three or four days in the refrigerator. After that, toss it out."

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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