

Should I stop eating meat? No need, experts say

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Credit: Maliz Ong

The UN's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) [warned Monday that processed meats like sausages and ham cause bowel cancer,](#) and red meat "probably" does too.

Does this mean we should stop eating meat?

By the IARC's own account, meat has "known health benefits".

And the agency says it does not know what a safe meat quota would be—or even if there is one.

Other specialists insist the report is no reason to drop steak from the menu, though it is probably wise for big eaters of it to cut back.

Meat is a good source of key nutrients like zinc, protein and vitamin B12, they point out, as well as iron, which humans absorb more easily from meat than from plants.

"This decision doesn't mean you need to stop eating any red and processed meat," said Tim Key, an epidemiologist at Cancer Research UK.

"But if you eat lots of it, you may want to think about cutting down. You could try having fish for your dinner rather than sausages, or choosing to have a bean salad for lunch over a BLT (bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich)."

Nutritionist Elizabeth Lund from Norfolk in England said obesity and lack of exercise were a far bigger cancer risks.

"Overall, I feel that eating meat once a day combined with plenty of fruit, vegetable and cereal fibre plus exercise and weight control, will allow for a low risk of CRC," she said, referring to colo-rectal cancer.

"It should also be noted that some studies have shown that if meat is consumed with vegetables or a high-fibre diet, the risk of CRC is reduced."

Ian Johnson of the UK-based Institute of Food Research, said [meat consumption](#) was "probably one of many" factors contributing to relatively high rates of [bowel cancer](#) in the United States, Western Europe and Australia—parts of the developed world where more meat has traditionally been eaten.

However, "there is little or no evidence that vegetarians in the UK have lower risk of bowel cancer than meat-eaters," he said.

The specialists point out that the cancer risk posed by a meaty diet was statistically much lower than other factors like tobacco smoking and air pollution.

The IARC report "does not mean... that eating bacon is as bad as smoking," said University of Reading nutrition expert Gunter Kuhnle.

"Processed meat can be part of a healthy lifestyle—smoking can't".

According to the World Health Organization, bowel cancer is the third most common type, with some 900,000 new cases every year, and 500,000 deaths.

Generally, dietary advice is to limit red-[meat](#) intake to once or twice a week, said nutrition professor Tom Sanders of King's College London—the equivalent of about two steaks or three hamburgers.

"The problem with this issue is that food is not like tobacco—we have to eat something."

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