

Five steps for a heart-healthy grilling season

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The smells of summer have returned: sunscreen, freshly cut grass and burgers sizzling on the grill.

For many families, backyard barbecues are a staple of summer dining. But often the foods people associate with summer grilling—including ribs, sausages, hot dogs and hamburgers—are processed or high in saturated fat and sodium, which contribute to heart health risks. And studies show cooking [meat](#) at high temperatures can cause harmful [chemical reactions](#) that raise the risk for [heart disease](#), diabetes and cancer.

The good news is, you don't need to close the lid on grilling. Food experts say there are steps outdoor chefs can take to make backyard barbecues healthier, while still loaded with flavor.

Choose healthier proteins

People often choose fatty meats and grill them for prolonged periods of time, said Penny Kris-Etherton, Evan Pugh University professor of nutritional sciences at Penn State University in University Park, Pennsylvania. "What we'd really like people to do is choose healthier meats, like chicken and fish."

But if beef it must be, go lean, she said.

Pre-cook or cut up your meat

The harmful chemicals associated with cancers and [cardiovascular disease](#) accumulate the longer fatty muscle meat—beef, pork, fish or poultry—is cooked or the higher the temperature, starting around 300 or 350 degrees.

Cutting leaner meat into smaller pieces that cook faster can lower some of those risks, Kris-Etherton said. "Either pre-cook the meat beforehand so it doesn't grill too long, turn down the temperature, or cut it into

smaller pieces. Add some vegetables and make shish kabobs."

Removing or avoiding charred edges and minimizing fat dripping onto the [heat source](#), which increases harmful chemicals, also can help.

Spice it up

Adding pepper and other [spices](#) to meat before grilling it may greatly reduce harmful chemical reactions, according to unpublished research led by J. Scott Smith, a professor of food science at Kansas State University in Manhattan. (The findings are considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.)

You need about a teaspoon of pepper or other spices for a quarter-pound burger, he said. While mixing the spices into the burger is fine, it's only necessary to get them onto the surface of the meat. "That's good enough, because all of this occurs on the surface," he said. "The chemical reactions are from [high heat](#), which doesn't get into the interior of the meat."

Smith's research shows that using marinades containing herbs that are members of the mint family, such as basil, sage, thyme, rosemary, oregano and marjoram, are just as effective as black pepper. Antioxidants in seasonings such as garlic and paprika also help block the formation of chemical compounds, he said.

If you're mixing spices into a marinade, coating the surface of the meat is sufficient, Smith said.

Other research shows a wide range of spices and herbs that have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects may help lower the risk for cardiovascular disease. Kris-Etherton said using marinades or dry rubs that contain spices also reduces the need for salt to flavor food.

"You can make a really delicious rub without sodium," she said. "Use dried herbs and spices to rub on meats and vegetables before you put them on the grill."

Eat your veggies

Grilling vegetables is a great alternative to meat, Kris-Etherton said. In addition to popular choices such as corn, there are many flavorful vegetables to choose from.

"Grill some [sweet potatoes](#)—they are absolutely delicious—or green pepper, onions or zucchini," she suggested.

Choose heart-healthy sides

Opting for whole-grain buns and side dishes such as bean salads are another way to make backyard barbecues better for [heart](#) health, Kris-Etherton said.

She suggested using low-sodium canned beans for simplicity. "Rinse them off, make a salad out of them with fresh parsley and tomatoes and onions, and jazz them up!"

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