

Does Red Meat Cause Cancer?

The American Institute for Cancer Research recommends limiting the consumption of red and processed meat. Here's why and how much.

December 9, 2024 By American Institute for Cancer Research and Cara Rosenbloom

Key Takeaways

- Eating lots of red and processed meat may increase the risk of colorectal cancer.
- Aim to eat no more than 12 to 18 ounces of red meat per week (cooked weight) and eat little, if any, processed meat.
- Chicken, turkey and fish are not classified as red meat and are not linked to an increased risk of cancer.

Steak is a barbeque staple, and it's fine to enjoy on occasion. Steak, pork chops and other red meats contain nourishing nutrients, such as protein, iron and zinc. However, too much red meat is tied to an increased risk of developing colorectal cancer, especially if the red meat has been smoked, cured or salted.

The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) offers 10 Cancer Prevention Recommendations to help reduce cancer risk. One of the Recommendations is [to limit consumption of red and processed meat](#). If you are curious why red meat affects cancer risk and how much is fine to eat, read on for answers to these questions.

How much red meat is safe to eat?

The recommendations differ for red vs. processed meat.

What is red meat?

Red meat includes unprocessed beef, pork and lamb, such as steak, ground beef or pork/lamb

chops. Aim to eat no more than [12 to 18 ounces](#) of red meat per week (cooked weight). That's about three portions per week, if they are about the size of a deck of cards. Eating more than 18 ounces of red meat per week increases your risk of [colorectal cancer](#).

What is processed meat?

Processed meat has been salted, smoked, cured or prepared with preservatives such as nitrites. Eat little, if any, processed meat. There is no recommended amount as it should be avoided as much as possible.

Examples of processed meat include:

- Bacon
- Ham
- Hot dogs
- Sausage
- Pepperoni
- Deli meats such as salami and bologna

For processed meat, every 50 grams (about one hot dog or two slices of ham) eaten daily raises the risk of colorectal cancer by 16 percent.

What about fish and poultry?

Poultry such as chicken and turkey are not classified as red meat. Poultry and fish are not linked to an increased risk of cancer.

Is canned chicken or tuna considered processed meat?

No. Canning is a form of processing, but it's not what defines processed meat (which involves processes like smoking or curing). Canned chicken and fish is fine to eat and does not increase cancer risk.

Does red meat cause cancer?

Science supports a link between high intake of red and processed meat and an increased risk of developing colorectal cancer. Why is meat linked to colorectal cancer? There are several reasons:

- Red meat is high in heme iron, which may promote colorectal tumors.
- Cooking red meat at high temperatures leads to the creation of compounds such as heterocyclic amines, which increase cancer risk.
- Nitrites used in processed meat may increase cancer risk.

Can I get enough protein if I reduce meat intake?

Yes! There is lots of protein in poultry, seafood, dairy and eggs. Plus, you can choose plant-based protein such as tofu, edamame, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds. Grains and vegetables also add small amounts of protein. If you eat a variety of these foods, you will get enough protein daily.

Should I choose meat alternatives?

Plant-based meat alternatives can range in nutritional value. Options like tofu, black beans and hummus are whole foods that are high in nutrients and minimally processed. Others, such as processed soy deli meat or veggie hot dogs, are ultra-processed foods that vary in nutrient content and may be high in sodium. When choosing a meat alternative, make whole plant foods your first choice. Try beans and tofu.

Tips for cutting back on meat:

Use these tips to seamlessly reduce your intake of red and processed meat, while increasing your reliance on nutrient-rich whole foods.

- Use AICR's [New American Plate](#) to build meals around plants instead of meat.
- Choose to celebrate Meatless Monday with a vegetarian meal once a week.
- Choose chicken, fish, turkey or tofu instead of red meat as your entrée.
- Stuff sandwiches with cheese, tuna, salmon or chopped egg instead of deli meat.

- Make charcuterie platters with vegetables, nuts, cheese and fruit instead of deli meats.
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SIDEBAR:

Ask the dietitian: I'm going to a backyard barbeque. Should I choose the ultra-processed veggie burger or the beef burger?

Answer: Choose the one you prefer and enjoy every bite. Both can be eaten on occasion but are not recommended daily. If most of your meals contain whole foods such as vegetables, fruit, grains, fish and beans, the occasional burger (whether meat-based or ultra-processed plant-based) is fine to enjoy. Your overall dietary pattern — day after day and month after month — matters more than any single individual meal. If you eat nourishing meals most of the time, there is always room for the occasional burger too.

AICR Impact

The American Institute for Cancer Research helps the public understand the relationship between lifestyle, nutrition and cancer risk. We work to prevent cancer through innovative research, community programs and impactful public health initiatives.

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