



Red Meat and Processed Meat

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the cancer agency of the World Health Organization (WHO), has recently released an evaluation result about the carcinogenicity of the consumption of red meat and processed meat. Processed meat was classified as “carcinogenic to humans” (Group 1) and red meat was classified as “probably carcinogenic to humans” (Group 2A). The latest IARC review **does not ask people to stop eating processed meats** but indicates that **reducing consumption of these products can reduce the risk of colorectal cancer**. When organisations arrange meals or provide catering service, such as business lunch and annual dinner, it is recommended to follow the healthy eating principles as well as to reduce the use of processed meat. Fresh/frozen lean meat and non-fried plain bean products are healthy alternatives. For details, please refer to the “Guideline on meal arrangement and meal provision”.

What are Red meat and Processed meat?

Referring to the definition by IARC, red meat refers to all mammalian muscle meat, such as beef, pork, lamb and horse; processed meat refers to meat that has been transformed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or other processes to enhance flavour or improve preservation. Examples of processed meat include ham, luncheon meat, bacon, sausages, corned beef, and beef jerky.

Cancer Risk of Processed meat is Different from that of Tobacco Smoking

The IARC classifications describe the strength of the scientific evidence about an agent being a cause of cancer, rather than assessing the level of risk. Processed meat and tobacco smoking have been classified in the same category as causes of cancer (Group 1, carcinogenic to humans), but this does NOT mean that they are equally dangerous. About 34 000 cancer deaths per year worldwide are attributable to diets high in processed meat. These numbers contrast with about 1 million cancer deaths per year globally due to tobacco smoking.



The More Intake, the Higher the Risk

The risk of developing colorectal cancer for an individual because of their consumption of processed meat remains small, but this risk increases with the amount of meat consumed. The experts concluded that each 50 gram portion of processed meat eaten daily increases the risk of colorectal cancer by 18%. Examples of 50 grams of processed meat are shown below:



1/3 small can of
luncheon meat



2 pieces of ham



1.5 pieces of sausage



2 pieces of bacon

Practising Healthy Eating

- A healthy balanced diet is a dietary pattern having grains as the largest portion of food, a lot of vegetables and fruit, and a moderate consumption of milk, meat and their alternatives.
- In our daily diet, we should choose food items that are low in fat/oil, salt and sugar and high in dietary fibre. Therefore, it is recommended to have at least five servings of fruit and vegetables a day and to reduce the intake of processed meat as it is considered as high in fat/oil and salt.
- The healthy eating principles also emphasise on having a variety of food, i.e. choosing different kinds of food. Apart from red meat, meat and alternatives also include poultry, fish and seafood, eggs, dry bean and soy products.
- Refer to the “Guideline on meal arrangement and meal provision” for meal arrangement and catering service for employees.

To know more about...

- ✧ “Guideline on meal arrangement and meal provision”, please visit http://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/gls_for_sectors_on_meal_provision_e.pdf
- ✧ information about red meat and processed meat, please visit <http://www.chp.gov.hk/en/content/42034.html>
- ✧ healthy eating, please visit ‘Health Zone’ website at <http://www.cheu.gov.hk>
- ✧ ‘Health@work.hk Project’, please visit <http://www.healthatwork.gov.hk>