

Is it Time to Say Goodbye to Processed Meat?

by Caroline de Lacvievier

After the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that processed meats were a Group 1 carcinogen, listed alongside tobacco, asbestos, and ethanol, the media backlash was intense. Headlines were a variation on a theme: "Baloney About Processed Meat and Cancer," "Italy's Parma ham connoisseurs defend prosciutto," "Cancer report on processed meat 'a farce." Farmers, meat sellers, and meat eaters alike were quick to accuse WHO of sensationalism and fear mongering. To be fair, the report was unclear and, at first blush, alarming. However, in a culture where bacon is a staple of Sunday brunches, where hot dogs are associated with nostalgic ballpark afternoons, Americans may just be struggling to accept that the food they love could make them sick.

Just how high are the risks?

First, let's clear up some misconceptions. The WHO report announced that processed meat was "carcinogenic to humans" (i.e. Group 1) while red meat was "probably carcinogenic to humans" (i.e. Group 2A). These findings were strongly linked to colorectal cancer with a weaker link to stomach and pancreatic cancer. While this sounds frightening, not all Group 1 carcinogens are created equal. In fact, there are some surprising items on the IARC list, including leather dust and soot. And while the report cited 800 studies linking cancer to processed and red meats, there are lurking variables to consider. Someone who consumes a lot of sausages may be prone to other unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, and a sedentary lifestyle.

Even so, the evidence against red and processed meat is pretty damning. The American Cancer Society has been cautioning us away from these food items for over a decade. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation reported that, worldwide, 34,000 deaths from bowel cancer were traceable to a diet high in processed meat, and the health risks don't stop at cancer. Red and processed meat can also cause cardiovascular disease as well as diabetes. These illnesses have been attributable to an astounding 526,000 deaths and 84,000 deaths, respectively.

The Twinkie phenomenon

With all of this evidence stacked against red and processed meat, why are news sources so quick to defend it? Consider the Twinkie. When Hostess closed its doors in 2012, the country had an explosively emotional reaction. Though the snack shares ingredients with sheet rock, shampoo, and rocket fuel, it was also a pop culture icon. "A little part of America died," said Time Magazine shortly after Hostess's closure.

People may struggle to give up processed meats for similar reasons. A recent article in the Boston Globe found that Bostonians' love of bacon and Fenway Franks would trump the WHO report's cautionary findings. Indeed, when a food item is so deeply embedded in a country's culture, its citizens can unwittingly become emotionally attached. While the impulse to join the "Say it aint so" media clammer may be seductive, it isn't particularly productive. My advice? The next time you see a game at Fenway, consider the kettle corn.