Bowel cancer research points to risks for even moderate meat-eaters

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Health editor

Eating even the moderate amounts of red and processed meat sanctioned by government guidelines increases the likelihood of developing bowel cancer, according to the largest UK study of the risks ever conducted.

The Department of Health suggests that anyone who eats more than 90g of red or processed meat a day should try to cut down to 70g or less, because of the known link with bowel cancer.

The NHS says 90g is “equivalent to around three thinly cut slices of beef, lamb or pork, where each slice is about the size of half a piece of sliced bread”.

Processed meat includes bacon, ham and sausages. A breakfast with two “typical British” sausages and two rashers of bacon would clock up 130g.

A five-year study of half a million people who have signed up to the UK Biobank research project found that those eating on average 76g of red or processed meat per day had a 20% increased risk of bowel cancer compared with those averaging 21g a day.

The risk rose by 20% with each extra slice of ham or rasher of bacon that the participants ate, and by 19% with each thick slice of roast beef or lamb cutlet.

Heavier drinkers of alcohol also had an increased risk - up by 24% for those who drank the most compared with those who drank least. Eating fibre in breakfast cereals and bread had a protective effect. In January a study commissioned by the World Health Organisation (WHO) said fibre also protects against heart disease.

Cancer Research UK’s expert in diet and cancer, Prof Tim Key, the study’s co-author, said the research had an extra adjustment to check if participants accurately reported what they had eaten. Diet studies are problematic because participants often either forget what they have eaten or lie.

All the Biobank participants were asked about their diet when they joined up. In this study they were also asked to fill an extra questionnaire every few months, detailing what they had eaten in the prior 24 hours.

The researchers found that those who ate the most and least red and processed meat tended to exaggerate their consumption or lack of it.

That led to a steeper increase in risk than in studies relied on by WHO when it produced the guidance incorporated into that of the Department of Health.

“We are not claiming that therefore the government recommendation is wrong and should be changed,” Key told the Guardian. The paper, published in the International Journal of Epidemiology, would have to be seen in the context of many others, he said.

Key also said meat had nutritional benefits. “Meat is important for iron. We would want to consider other aspects of health if we were going to change the recommendation.”

Alcohol, on the other hand, increased bowel cancer risk and did not have nutritional benefits, he said.

Dr Gunter Kuhnle of Reading University said the analysis of the link between meat intake and bowel cancer was very thorough and confirmed previous findings about the risks.

“The results of this study also question the recent focus on nitrite as the main culprit for colorectal cancer: the authors found very small differences between red and processed meat in this study, even though only processed meat contains nitrite,” he said.