Eating more than 25g of red meat a day ‘raises cancer risk’

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Moderate red meat eaters are significantly more likely to develop bowel cancer than occasional consumers, according to the largest UK study of its kind.

Even those who broadly follow government advice and eat 76 grams of red and processed meat a day, equivalent to a slice of roast beef and a rasher of bacon, are 20 per cent more likely to develop the cancer than those who only eat 21g a day, the study found.

There are about 42,000 cases of bowel cancer diagnosed each year in the UK. One in 15 men and one in 18 women born after 1960 in the UK will receive a diagnosis of the disease in their lifetime.

Government guidelines, most recently updated last year, say people should “on average eat no more than 70g red and processed meat a day”. The Department of Health advises that people eating more than 90g should cut down to 70g. A slice of ham or rasher of bacon weighs about 20g while a thick slice of roast beef or lamb chop comes in at about 50g.

The study, published in the International Journal of Epidemiology, suggested that bowel cancer risk begins to increase if someone eats more than 25g of such meat per day. The risk rises 20 per cent with every 25g of processed meat eaten over that baseline, the study found. For every 50g of red meat eaten the risk increased 19 per cent.

“Our results strongly suggest that people who eat red and processed meat four or more times a week have a higher risk of developing bowel cancer than those who eat red and processed meat less than twice a week,” Professor Tim Key, co-author of the study, from the University of Oxford, said. “There’s substantial evidence that red and processed meat are linked to bowel cancer, and the World Health Organisation classifies processed meat as carcinogenic and red meat as probably carcinogenic — but most previous research looked at people in the 1990s or earlier, and diets have changed significantly since then, so our study gives a more up-to-date insight.”

For the new study, researchers used the UK Biobank to study the diets in the late 2000s of 475,581 men and women aged 40 to 69 over an average of just under six years. During the study, 2,569 developed bowel cancer. Among 68,359 participants eating around 21g of red and processed meat per day there were 274 cases of bowel cancer. Among the 192,600 eating an average 76g per day there were 1,209 cases.

Dr Gunter Kuhnle, associate professor in nutrition and health, University of Reading, who was not involved in the study, said: “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.”

Dr Alison Tedstone, chief nutritionist at Public Health England, said cutting consumption of red and processed meat would also reduce salt and saturated fat in the diet, decreasing the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Dr Julie Sharp, Cancer Research UK’s head of health information, said: “The government guidelines on red and processed meat are general health advice and this study is a reminder that the more you can cut down beyond this, the more you can lower your chances of developing bowel cancer.”
Plucked from obscurity The geraniums at Neame Lea Nurseries in Spalding have peaked in time for Easter, when warm weather will make for perfect planting.