

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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## “Processed Meat: Will It Kill You ?”

Headlines say regularly consuming a steak or a bacon sandwich raises your risk of heart disease and cancer. Bacon, hot dogs, sausage, deli meats, salami, corned beef, beef jerky and ham as well as canned meat and meat-based sauces and other processed meats are known to contain unhealthy preservatives and chemical additives. Processed meat has been modified to either extend its shelf life or change the taste and the main methods are smoking, curing, or adding salt or preservatives. It is these additions which could be increasing the risk of cancer. However, World Health Organization (WHO) experts admit the cancer risk is "not yet fully understood". According to WHO, every 50g of processed meat - fewer than two slices of bacon - increases the risk of cancer by 18%. Every 100g of red meat (an eight ounce steak is 225g) increases the risk by 17%, although the WHO admits there is limited evidence. Processed meat has been placed into Group 1 as the scientific evidence says it definitely does cause cancer. The WHO says there is insufficient evidence to set safe levels as to how much red meat is safe to eat. Official advice is for no more than 70 grams a day of red or processed meat. Researchers from the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (Epic) followed half a million people in 10 countries for more than 12 years. The researchers found that eating moderate amounts of red meat had no effect on mortality, but eating processed meat, such as bacon, ham or salami, had a negative effect on health. But, there are lots of good things in red meat. Beef, whole or minced, is a great source of protein and essential nutrients, like iron, several B-vitamins as well as vitamin A and essential fatty acids, which are vital for health. In the U.S., more than 3,000 substances can be legally added to foods for the purpose of preservation, coloring, texture, increasing flavor and more. Look for them on ingredient labels. Preservatives are added to prevent rancidity, spoilage, foul odors or off colors. Antioxidants are key player additives used to preserve food. I have repeatedly warned of the dangers of excessive antioxidant overkill. Cheese-eating vegetarian should not feel too smug because gram for gram, cheese is an even richer source of saturated fat than burgers.

In the America that I love, do not turn an innocent pleasure into a guilty one. In the UK, the Meat Advisory Panel said, "Avoiding red meat in the diet is not a protective strategy against cancer." Instead, focus on avoiding alcohol, smoking and being overweight. I discuss harmful antioxidant food additives in my book, *Antioxidant Overkill*, available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Bon appétit.

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