

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Medical Facts About Meats”

Controversy surrounds the health impact of various meats. The consumption of saturated fats in red meats and dairy products has been considered causative of heart disease for decades. Red meat is the name used for the meat from mammals—like beef, lamb, and pork. White meats include poultry, like chicken and turkey. Processed meat includes sausage, bacon, beef jerky, corned beef, salami, and more. New research supports the notion that red meat can be incorporated into a healthier diet. Currently, 77% of Americans exceed recommended levels of saturated fat, and meat is a major contributor to this. Red meat is a nutrient-rich food, not only as a source for protein but also bioavailable iron. Experts found that consuming more than half a serving per day of red meat, which is equivalent to a 3-ounce serving three times per week, did not worsen blood pressure and blood total cholesterol, HDL, LDL and triglyceride concentrations. According to the USDA’s *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025*, a healthy dietary pattern can include lean meats and poultry, but should involve “relatively lower consumption of red and processed meats.” Beef is a great source of several vitamins and minerals, including iron and vitamin B12, which assists in red blood-cell production. It is also a good source of zinc, which helps the body produce testosterone, and selenium. However, increased consumption of red meat is associated with higher risks of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, certain types of cancer, and all-cause mortality. One highly popularized study, published in 2020 in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, linked consumption of red and processed meat with a higher risk of heart disease and death. Interestingly, researchers found a 4% higher risk of cardiovascular disease for people who ate two servings per week of poultry. Increases in red meat consumption were associated with a higher mortality risk regardless of sex or age. Researchers found that increasing total red meat consumption by half a serving daily resulted in a 10% higher mortality risk. This increased more with increased processed meat consumption, with the mortality risk increasing by 13%. Pork is an alternative to red meat. It boosts several beneficial nutrients, including thiamine (B1), selenium, zinc, B12, and niacin, antioxidants, and amino acids. Those who incorporated pork into their diets saw significant reductions in BMI, waist circumference, and body fat percentage. Also, poultry, when consumed with a diet rich in vegetables, is associated with reduced risk of obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes. Experts recommend staying away from processed meats, which are generally considered to be unhealthy. These include any meat that has been smoked, salted, cured, dried, or canned.

In the America that I love, we love meat, but some sources are better than others.

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

rhowesmd@hughes.net | www.iwillfindthecure.org

