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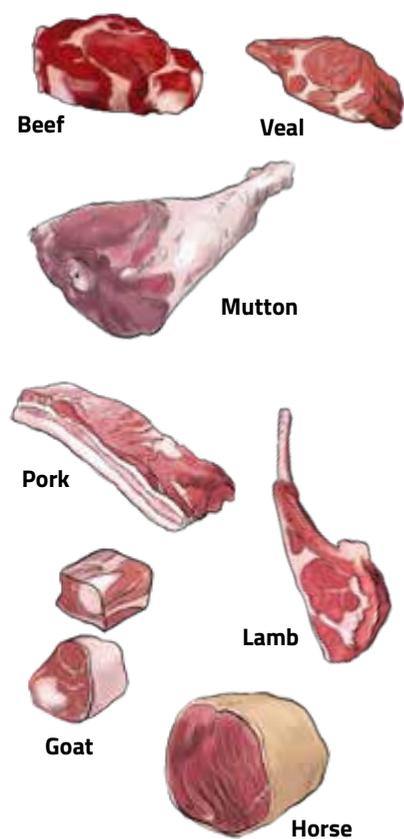
How to have your meat and eat it, too

A group of 22 experts from the International Agency for Research on Cancer, part of the World Health Organisation (WHO), concluded on Monday that consuming processed meat causes colorectal cancer, while eating red meat probably causes cancer. Oncologists TODAY spoke to noted that cancer has multiple causes, and said keeping to general guidelines for healthy living is better than changing a particular dietary habit. The Health Promotion Board said the National Nutrition Survey 2010 shows the amount of processed meat an average Singaporean adult consumes is "considerably lower" than that cited in the WHO report. ● SEE STORY: PAGE 21

RED MEAT

'Probably carcinogenic'

Refers to all types of mammalian muscle meat such as beef, veal, pork, lamb, mutton, horse, and goat, including frozen or minced meat

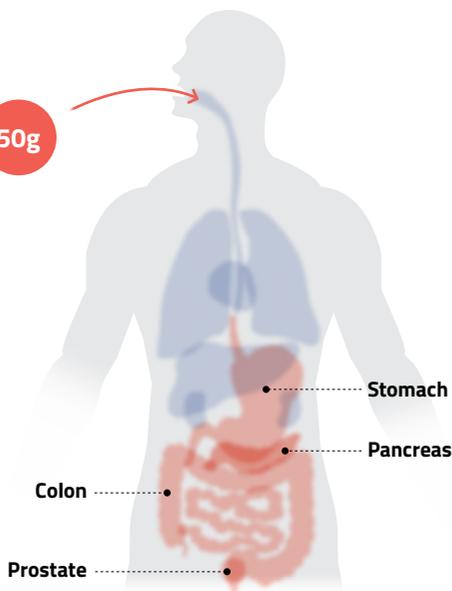


1 Each 50g portion of processed meat eaten daily

50g

2 Increases the risk of colorectal cancer by 18%

↑ 18%



How cancer is caused

The lowdown on carcinogenic chemicals

Heterocyclic aromatic amines (HAA)

N-nitroso compounds (NOC)

Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH)

N-nitroso compounds (NOC)



Meat processing

Curing or smoking meat require nitrites or nitrates for preservation

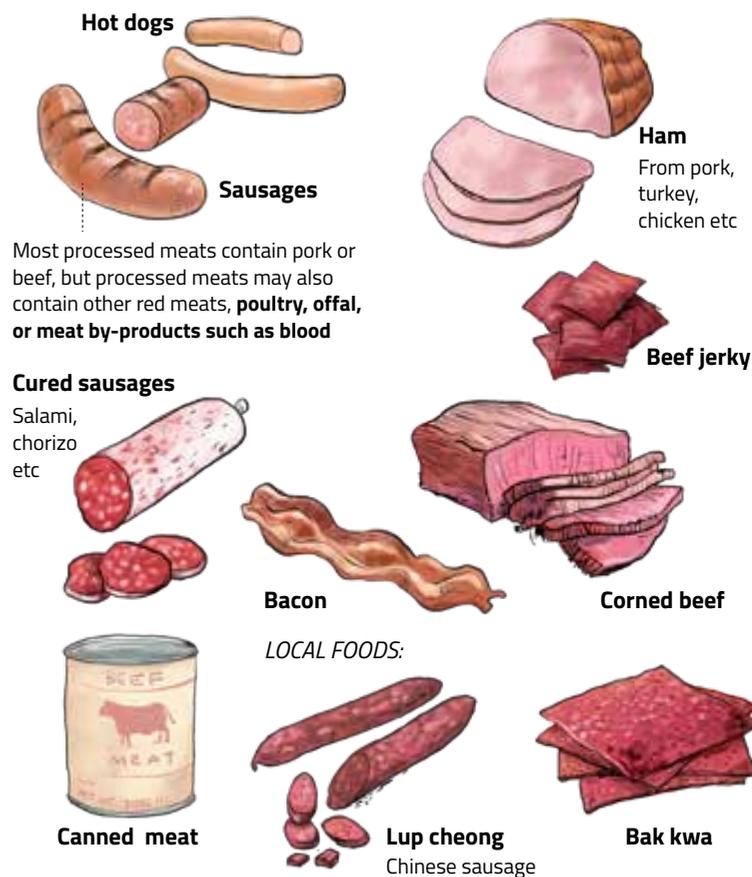
Cooking

High-temperature cooking produces the highest amounts of these chemicals

PROCESSED MEAT

'Definitely carcinogenic'

Refers to all meat that has been transformed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or other processes to enhance flavour or improve preservation. This can be either red or white meat



Sources: World Health Organization, The Lancet

Adolfo Arranz / TODAY

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SINGAPORE – Eat as little bacon, ham and other processed meat as possible, and observe the general guidelines for healthy living that include not smoking, exercising regularly, and eating more fruits and vegetables.

This was the advice of experts in Singapore following a World Health Organization (WHO) agency saying on Monday that consuming processed meat causes colorectal cancer.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) reviewed over 800 studies before concluding that each 50-gram portion of processed meat eaten daily increases the risk of colorectal cancer by 18 per cent. It also said red meat probably causes cancer, although evidence showing that eating red meat causes colorectal cancer is limited.

While consuming processed meat should be kept to a minimum where possible, it is important to remember that cancer has multiple causes, said Dr Raymond Ng of the National Cancer Centre Singapore. “Healthy living means avoiding smoking, eating more fruits and vegetables, exercising and keeping one’s body weight within the ideal range, rather than just specifically changing one particular dietary habit,” said Dr Ng, a senior consultant medical oncologist.

Experts said there are no specific guidelines on how much processed or red meat to eat. According to the National Nutrition Survey 2010, an average Singaporean adult consumes about 10g of processed meat a day, with those aged 18 to 29 years old consuming more — 20g a day, equivalent to a hot dog.

“Such levels of consumption over time can be a cause of concern. However, we note that this is considerably lower than the amount cited in the WHO report (50g),” a Health Promotion Board spokesperson said.

The board recommends no more than two servings of processed meat a week, with each serving equivalent to a hot dog.

Dr Wong Seng Weng, consultant medical oncologist at The Cancer Centre, felt it was “reasonable to extrapolate” the IARC’s classification of processed meat to other processed meats found in Singapore, such as Chinese sausage and bak kwa (marinated, sliced barbecued pork commonly eaten during Chinese New Year).

“The key is moderation in everything, so having two pieces of bacon once in a while is still acceptable,” said Dr Sue Lo, director and senior consultant oncologist from The Harley Street Heart and Cancer Centre.

According to the IARC, meat contains chemicals that form during processing or cooking, and some of these chemicals are known or suspected carcinogens. But it is not yet fully understood how cancer risk is increased by red meat or processed meat.

Meat sellers told TODAY that not all types of processed meat are of the

CANCER DEATHS WORLDWIDE

● Although processed meat is now classified with tobacco smoking and asbestos as cancer-causing, it does not mean the substances are all equally dangerous, said the IARC. The Global Burden of Disease Project – an independent academic research organisation – estimates that diets high in processed meat cause 34,000 cancer deaths worldwide each year. In contrast, one million cancer deaths a year worldwide are due to tobacco smoking and 600,000 deaths to alcohol consumption.

To ensure that children are not consuming excessive amounts of processed foods, the Health Promotion Board’s Healthy Meals in Schools Programme and Healthy Meals in Childcare Centres Programme do not allow processed meats to be served in schools and childcare centres.

same standard. Huber’s Butchery executive director Andre Huber said the raw sausages produced at its Dempsey store contain only minced meat, water, salt, herbs and spices that are then put into a “natural casing”.

It could be the chemicals, additives, flavouring and fillers used by big commercial producers that are cancer-causing, he said. “For hundreds and thousands of years, humans have processed meat to preserve it and never had such a widespread problem with

cancer,” Mr Huber said, adding that he did not think the IARC’s statement would affect sales.

Bak kwa seller Roy Aw said eating in moderation is important. “More and more people are getting cancer and eating meat is a factor, but to blame it all on barbecued meat is not quite (correct). “There are so many kinds of processed meat in the market, so it’s up to customers to distinguish for themselves,” said Mr Aw, 51, owner of Hu Zhen Long Foodstuff Trading.

“If it’s cancer-causing, I’ll be the first one to get cancer because I’ve eaten bak kwa every day, since I was young,” he added.

Undergraduate Jonathan Chia, 24, is unlikely to moderate his penchant for red meat. “I’d rather die of cancer eating meat... not that I hate veggies, but veggies-only sounds pretty sad. I’ve never looked forward to a salad,” said Mr Chia, who eats meat every day, 80 per cent of which is red meat.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY STACEY LIM

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