

People who eat less meat tend to live longer

Written by Nicole Winbush MD
Tuesday, 07 May 2013 09:27



Question:

Is eating meat bad for your health?

Answer:

Meat can provide many essential nutrients in our diet. It is a rich source of iron and of protein that is the building block for muscle and many of the chemical processes in our body. However, it is not the only source for protein. Non-meat sources of protein include dairy products, eggs, nuts and beans. It is possible to get enough protein in your diet without eating meat and many people chose to adopt a meat-free lifestyle for religious, health or ethical reasons. There are so many recommendations these days about how we should be eating. Some of these recommendations are often in direct conflict to one another. One area where many diets differ is on their recommendations about eating meat - some recommend eating a lot of meat while others recommend limiting or cutting meat out of one's diet completely. What is best? Read on.

Meat is a broad term. There are many types of meat. 'Red' meats such as beef, pork and lamb tend to be higher in saturated fat, a form of fat that is thought to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. 'White' meats are more lean forms of meat such as chicken, turkey and fish are generally lower in saturated fat (especially if you do not eat this skin). Processed meats (they can be red or white) refer to meat products that have things added to them like salt, chemical preservatives, flavorings and sweeteners. Processed meats include things like sausages, bacon, luncheon meats or cold cuts, hot dogs, and ham.

So, should you be eating meat? As with many health questions, there are some things that are known and some things that are less clear. But, here is what we do know.

People who eat less meat tend to live longer. Communities where people eat small amounts to no meat have been shown to have some of the longest life expectancies. For instance, here in the United States, the community with the longest life expectancy is a group of Seventh Day Adventists living in Southern California. Is this because they are vegetarian? Or is it because they and many others who follow a vegetarian lifestyle in general tend to be more health conscious (e.g., smoke less, drink less alcohol) and in the case of religious communities, often have more strong social and community connections which have been shown to be a big

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contributor to life expectancy? It is not clear. We can benefit from their example by lessening the meat in our diet and making sure that we are paying attention to the other important aspects of our health.

If you are going to eat meat, avoid processed meats. Eating a diet high in processed meats will kill you faster. Yes, you read right. I am not usually this blunt. But, after reviewing the evidence (and there is a lot that has come out recently) it is clear, people who eat more processed meat tend to die sooner, especially from cardiovascular diseases and cancers. The high salt content and preservatives in processed meats are thought to contribute to these problems. So, let's review, what are examples of processed meats: ham, bacon, sausages, cold cuts, pepperoni, anything where you pick up the package and see a list of ingredients. What can you eat instead? Bake a chicken at the beginning of the week and cut it up to use on sandwiches. Instead of sausage, ham or bacon for breakfast, consider a meatless option or find an unprocessed meat option for breakfast like some chopped up chicken from last night's dinner cooked with some veggies and eggs.

If you eat meat, eat less of it. Many of us who eat meat, eat a lot more than we need. Our body cannot store the extra protein that is in meat. It will either get broken down and eliminated as waste or be converted and stored as fat. In addition, eating too much meat can be hard on your kidneys. Most adults unless they are extremely active only require somewhere between 40-70 grams of protein per day. If you are like me, I have no idea what that means. So, for example, a 1/2 chicken breast contains approximately 30 grams of protein or almost 1/2 of the average daily requirement. Just think how much extra protein you are getting if you have bacon for breakfast, a couple of pieces of chicken for lunch and pot roast for dinner. This is a lot more than your body needs or can use.

There is more to worry about with meat than just meat.

The potential health issues of eating meat go beyond the fat and calories and excess protein. Recently, there has been a lot in the news about the antibiotics that are used in large quantities in the large-scale meat production operations that supply most of the meat in the United States. Many of these antibiotics are used to help increase the size of the farm animals so that they can grow bigger quicker. This allows meat to be sold for cheaper prices, which can make it more affordable, but also contributes to many of us eating more of it than we need. There is growing concern that these antibiotics that are used for animals may still be present in cooked meat and get into our bodies and lead infections that antibiotics can no longer cure. This could become a serious health concern. Eating less meat and trying (if and when possible) to eat meat that is raised humanely without added antibiotics can help protect your health and that of your family and community.

So, what is the answer?

We know that many vegetarians live longer than heavy meat eaters, but the reasons for this may have to do not only with their diet but with other lifestyle choices. If you eat meat, try to follow other healthy lifestyle recommendations including regular exercise, not smoking and trying to create and maintain a community of individuals who you can rely on for support. In addition, if you eat meat, consider eating less of it. Vegetables, grains and beans should make up most of what we eat. Finally, avoid processed meats as much as possible. They have well

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documented health risks.

Just to be clear, I am not advocating that everyone become a vegetarian. I eat meat and I find I function better with a bit of concentrated protein. I know other people who say they feel better not eating meat. However, I continue to work to decrease the overall amount of meat my family and I eat for the many of the reasons we have discussed. With this information and your personal experience find a balanced, sustainable eating plan that works for you and helps support your individual, your family and community's health.

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. She wants to hear from you! To respond to this article, request topics for future articles and for additional resources email functionwellmedicine@gmail.com, visit [Function Well Medicine](#) on Facebook or tweet @DrNicoleWinbush.