



May 22, 2010 – Omaha, NE

## Give Me the Beef

Nutrition research is amazing sometimes. Just when you think you have something nailed down, along comes another piece of research that throws it all up in the air. Such is the case with a recently published study in the journal *Circulation* (1). While I couldn't get access to the complete article, I did read the abstract. Researchers reviewed studies that examined the relationship between the meat intake—red meat and processed meat—and the incidence of heart disease, diabetes, and stroke. What processed meats are we talking about? Bacon, sausage, hot dogs, and other packaged meats. Let's see what they found.

### The Study

The premise of the study was that saturated-fat intake is associated with the development of inflammation and subsequently degenerative disease such as heart disease and diabetes. Meats contain primarily saturated fat, so it makes sense to see what relationship exists between meat intake and those diseases.

Researchers used a very elaborate process to select studies that examined the relationship between meat intake and heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Out of close to 1,600 studies, they found 20 that fit. Then they performed a meta-analysis to see what the studies revealed when combined. The 20 studies had over 1.2 million subjects—any way you look at it, that has to provide some information, even if you're not a fan of meta-analysis (which as I've stated many times, I am not).

They reported that red-meat intake—a 3.3-ounce serving per day—was not associated with an increased risk of heart disease or diabetes. However, with only a 1.7-ounce serving of processed meats per day, they found a 42% increased risk of heart disease and a 19% increased risk of diabetes. There was no association between either type of meat and strokes, but only a couple of studies looked at that relationship, so no conclusions could be drawn.

### My Take

I think it's more meaningful to evaluate disease risk in a slightly different way—in this case, I looked at the actual cases of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes as a percentage of the total number of subjects. Out of the 1.2 million subjects, 2% had heart attacks, 0.2% had a stroke, and 0.9% developed diabetes. A 42% increased risk of having a heart attack means that 2.8 people out of a hundred would have a heart attack instead of 2.0. The risk of diabetes and stroke wasn't significantly affected.

But here's the thing. Those are the disease rates of the subjects in those studies. If we changed our diet, got fit, lost weight, and managed stress better, maybe the rate of heart attacks would be much lower than 2% to begin with. Change that rate from 2% to 0.2% and whether you eat processed meats or not doesn't matter. Why? Because you're doing so many positive things, the amount of meat in your diet probably won't affect you—and let's get real, folks, you'll never reduce the risk to zero.

### The Bottom Line

The researchers made no sweeping recommendations. Rather, they said that further research is warranted to tease out what the real problem is in processed meat—some scientists suggested it was the high sodium content,

while others blamed the dyes and other additives used to cure the meats. I think looking for the real problem is the right conclusion.

What should you do? Well, it seems that if you want to eat red meat—and I do—it would be better to eat fresh meat. Use processed meats sparingly or save them for special occasions, such as a hot dog at a picnic or a part of a sub at a working lunch. Seems like a reasonable approach to me. These findings reinforce my belief that the closer your food is to the way nature made it, the better it is for you—even beef.

What are you prepared to do today?

**Dr. Chet**

**Reference:**

1. Circulation. Online 5/17/2010. doi: 10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.109.924977

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