

# Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

## Be aware of how much processed meat you eat

**I have been trying to avoid processed meat because I heard it is linked to cancer. But this year, my family is serving ham for Christmas dinner. Ham is processed, right? Should I ask my family to serve something else?**

Yes, ham is a processed meat, and it's great that you're aware of the concerns raised about eating too much of it. But most health professionals would say you don't have to worry about one dinner. It's your overall pattern of eating that really matters.

Studies have linked processed meat with an increased risk of cancer for years. A report issued in October 2015 raised the issue's profile significantly. That's when the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer said there is "sufficient" evidence to label processed meat as a carcinogen, as well as "limited" evidence linking red meat, such as beef, pork and lamb, with cancer.

The evidence for both types of meat is strongest in relation to colorectal cancers, which are cancers of the colon and rectum, or large intestine.

Processed meat includes meat that has been salted, cured, fermented, smoked or processed in other ways in order to enhance flavor and improve preservation. This includes not only ham, bacon, sausage and hot dogs, but corned beef, beef jerky, canned meat and most lunchmeats, as well — even those made from chicken and turkey.

WHO said eating just 1.75 ounces of processed meat a day could increase the risk of colorectal cancer by 18 percent. To put that in perspective, the American Cancer Society reports that the lifetime risk of developing colorectal cancer is about 4.7 percent — slightly higher for men, slightly lower for women. An increase of 18 percent would



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raise the risk to about 5.5 percent. It's important to note that other factors, including obesity, inactivity, alcohol consumption and other dietary habits, as well as a genetic predisposition, also increase the risk of colorectal cancer. On the other hand, diets rich in fruits and vegetables are linked with a lower risk for many types of cancer.

Since 2007, the American Institute of Cancer Research, or AICR, has recommended avoiding processed meats, even though it remains unclear precisely what it is about them that raises cancer risk. One possibility is related to the compounds formed from the nitrates and nitrites that are added to processed meats to preserve color and prevent spoilage. These days, you might see lunchmeat and other types of processed meat labeled "nitrate/nitrite-free," but the AICR is reserving judgment on these products for now. They still are likely to be smoked, salted or cured, all of which also elevate the risk of cancer.

Instead of worrying about the holiday ham, you might consider keeping a log of how much processed meat you eat over the course of a normal week. It might be a lot less than you think. Or it might be more. Being aware is the first step.

The AICR recommends opting for fresh chicken or fish most of the time, or trying different sources of protein such as eggs and tofu. But don't worry about the occasional slice of ham.

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**Editor:** This column was reviewed by Dan Remley, Ohio State University Extension field specialist in Food, Nutrition and Wellness.

Have a great holiday! Chow Line is taking two weeks off. The next column is scheduled for Jan. 8, 2016.

*Chow Line is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1043, or [filipic.3@osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@osu.edu).*

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