

# Is red meat still unhealthy? maybe not, after all, says study

WASHINGTON: Cutting back on red meat is standard medical advice to prevent cancer and heart disease — but a review of dozens of studies has concluded that the potential risk is low and evidence uncertain. In new guidelines published yesterday in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, a panel of researchers from seven countries suggested that “adults continue current unprocessed red meat consumption.”

The advice — which immediately drew a sharp reaction from other experts — added that adults should also “continue current processed meat consumption.” The research, published in the journal edited by the American College of Physicians, analyzed multiple studies that, taken together, showed reducing red meat consumption by three servings per week could lower cancer mortality by seven deaths per 1,000 people.

Researchers said any such decline was modest and that they had found only a “low” degree of certainty about the statistic. They added that the quality of evidence linking processed meat with cardiovascular diseases and diabetes was “very low.” “There are very small risk reductions in cancer, heart disease and diabetes, however the evidence is uncertain,” Bradley Johnston, an epidemiology professor at Canada’s Dalhousie University and director of the NutriRECS group that put together the guidelines, told AFP. “So there may be a reduction — or there may not be. “People need to make their own decisions. We are giving them the best estimate of the truth.”

### Steaks, sausages back on menu?

The researchers said they want to change the “old school”

approach of giving general nutritional recommendations, and to bring more focus on evidence of individual benefit. “People should look at this and hopefully make more well-informed personal choices, rather than being told what to do by authoritative organizations,” Johnston said. But eating less red meat and processed meat has been a cornerstone of dietary guidance for decades in many countries and from leading health groups.

### The potential risk is low and evidence uncertain

The World Health Organization International Agency for Research on Cancer says that processed meat is carcinogenic, while red meat is “probably carcinogenic.” In response to the latest guidelines, the World Cancer Research Fund said it would not change its advice. “We maintain our confidence in the rigorous research conducted for 30 years,” said its director of research, Giota Mitrou.

Marji McCullough, epidemiologist at the American Cancer Society, said the researchers had taken into account people’s personal values and preferences. “It’s kind of like saying: ‘we know helmets can save lives, but some people still prefer the feeling of the wind in their hair when they ride bikes. And let’s face it, most people won’t crash,’” she said. “But everyone agrees you should wear a helmet.”

Kevin McConway, emeritus professor of applied statistics at Britain’s Open University, said the lack of hard scientific evidence meant there were few clear answers. “Depressingly, all this tends to indicate that after all these years and all these millions of research participants, we still don’t know much,” he said. — AFP

## Indonesia scraps plans to close komodo island

JAKARTA: Indonesia has scrapped plans to ban tourists from an island home to komodo dragons and will instead limit visitor numbers and raise entry prices to create a “premium destination”, officials said. A plan announced last year would have seen Komodo national park close from the start of 2020, over concerns that the giant lizard species were suffering from the effects of mass tourism.

But the mooted closure sparked concern in the area’s tourism industry and could have meant relocating a couple thousand island residents. It also did not apply to nearby islands where the giant, slaving carnivores are also found. Indonesian environment minister Siti Nurbaya said Monday that the park would not be closed. “We will just turn it into a world-class holiday destination,” she added in a statement.

Last year, the region’s governor sparked a controversy when he proposed charging

visitors \$500 to see the dragons, about 50 times the current \$10 entrance fee. Maritime minister Luhut Pandjaitan said Monday that a new quota system would be introduced to limit the number of visitors to the island, amid concerns that tourism was putting too much stress on the lizards. There have also been concerns about declining numbers of deer, boars and other natural prey, as well as attempts to smuggle the lizards.

Thousands of tourists annually descend on the cluster of islands in the eastern part of the country — the only place in the world where komodo dragons can be seen in their natural habitat. The islands are home to nearly 2,900 dragons, which can grow to around three meters in length. An adult typically weighs from 70 to 90 kilograms. Tourism ministry spokesman Guntur Sakti said Tuesday that the islands would be turned into a “premium destination”, without elaborating.

“It is important to provide certainty so that the tourism industry is not hampered in its work,” he added. Indonesia has launched a push to replicate Bali’s success across the Southeast Asian archipelago, including trying to draw more visitors to Lake Toba on Sumatra island as well as ancient Buddhist and Hindu temples. — AFP

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