Can Eating Less Meat Lower Your Cancer Risk?

Reducing red meat intake or switching to a pescatarian or vegetarian diet could reduce the risk of three types of cancer.

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A new study found that eating less meat or following a vegetarian or pescatarian diet can lower a person's risk of developing cancer.

The study, published in BMC Medicine, found that the risk of developing any type of cancer was 2% lower for low meat eaters (consuming meat no more than five times a week), 10% lower for pescatarians (people who eat seafood but not meat) and 14% lower for vegetarians when compared with regular meat eaters.

Researchers also discovered that a low-meat diet could lower the risk for specific types of cancer, including colorectal cancer, breast cancer and prostate cancer.

Cody Watling, a PhD student at the University of Oxford, and colleagues used data from the UK BioBank to explore links between diet and the development of cancer. The researchers gathered detailed genetic and health information from nearly 500,000 British people over the course of 11 years. Depending on their diet, participants in the study were split into four groups. Regular meat eaters (consuming meat more than five times a week) accounted for 53% of participants, 44% were low meat eaters and just over 2% were pescatarians, while less than 2% of participants were vegetarians.

The researchers found that those who consumed less meat had a 9% lower risk of colorectal cancer compared with those who consumed meat regularly. Previous evidence suggests the intake of processed red meat, specifically, is associated with a higher risk for colorectal cancer.

Pescatarians and vegetarians had a lower risk of prostate cancer—20% and 31% less, respectively—compared with regular meat eaters.

The study also found that a vegetarian diet lowered the risk for postmenopausal breast cancer by 18% compared with regular meat consumption. This association, however, was attributed largely to the lower average body weight of vegetarian women.

This was an observational study, which means the researchers studied participants' health without asking them to change their diet, Watling and colleagues wrote in The Conversation. This means they can't be certain that cancer is directly caused by diet or attributable to other factors. However, important factors such as age, sex, smoking, alcohol consumption and sociodemographic status were taken into consideration.

The association between red and processed meat and cancer risk is well known. This has led doctors to suggest that people try to limit consumption of these foods in their regular diet. Because diet and weight are major factors in cancer risk, experts also recommended that people consume a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans in order to maintain a healthy body weight.

"It's important to note that simply eliminating meat doesn't necessarily make your diet healthier," the researchers wrote. "For example, some people who follow a vegetarian or pescatarian diet may still eat low amounts of fruits and vegetables and high amounts of refined and processed foods, which might lead to poor health."

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