

# America's Tragic Love Affair with Processed Meats

Everyone has seen pictures of factory farms. Satisfying the world's ever-increasing appetite for meat has meant that billions of animals are confined, abused, and eventually slaughtered. Environmentalists have sounded the alarm, showing that the global mass of living, breathing, belching, flatulating animals on farms are responsible for 37 percent of methane emissions. Methane is an even more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. And with the worldwide food shortage, feeding pound after pound of grain to animals ensures many people will go to bed hungry, while others go to bed bloated.

From a medical standpoint, the alarm bells have been ringing for decades. For many years, Americans have had a shorter life expectancy compared with people in Japan where diets were based on rice rather than meat. This difference is being erased as meaty diets spread to Asia and weight problems, diabetes, cancer, and heart disease follow in their wake.

While health authorities may disagree on various details of healthy nutrition, one point has been settled beyond question: Hot dogs and other processed meats cause cancer. Yes, that all-beef frank may be as American

as baseball and backyard picnics, and it is an easy sell to kids. But America's astronomical colorectal cancer rates are inextricably linked to diet—and at the top of the list of culprits is processed meats.

The problem is enormous. Every year, 160,000 Americans are diagnosed with colorectal cancer and 50,000 die of it. Over a lifetime, about one in 15 Americans develops the disease. About half of all cases are already incurable when they are found.

Although there has been an understandable push for efforts to detect cancer before it has advanced too far, preventing cancer in the first place is always preferable. And that means a diet change. Just as preventing lung cancer means avoiding tobacco, preventing colorectal cancer means avoiding the foods that cause it.

The problem now is simply cultural. As slow as people were to accept that the cool-looking cigarette in Bogart's lips might have been linked to the cancer that killed him, we have been even slower to accept that the foods we've given our children might lead to cancer in adulthood. Few children can spell carcinogenesis, but every last one can sing the Oscar Meyer wiener song.

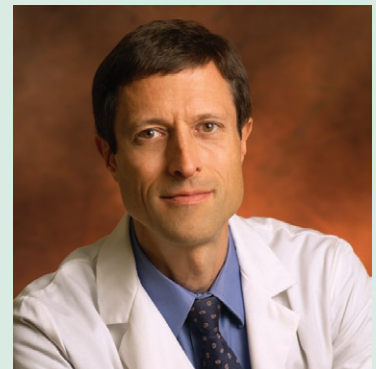
It is time for a change. Having invested millions of dollars in research to track down the causes of cancer, we are foolish if we disregard what it has uncovered.

The federal government should stop sending meats to schools to be processed into hot dogs and bologna, and schools should stop serving these products. People who turn up their noses at a healthy soy hot dog should picture the carcass remnants and chemical additives that make a "genuine" meat hot dog.

Some consumers may doubt that the foods passing through their digestive tracts could influence the risk of cancer in the cells that line it. But they should err on the side of caution when it comes to feeding their children. And companies that sell these products should provide warnings that are at least as prominent as those on cigarette packs. They are well aware that these foods cause cancer, and their customers deserve to know the same information.

Processed meats are not the only foods linked to cancer. But our willingness to address this obvious health threat is an index to how seriously we take the health of our children.

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