

SECTION 4

Replacing Meat

When cancer researchers started to search for links between diet and cancer, one of the most noticeable findings was that people who avoided meat were much less likely to develop the disease. Large studies in England and Germany showed that vegetarians were about 40 percent less likely to develop cancer, compared to meat-eaters.¹⁻³ In the United States, researchers studied Seventh-day Adventists. This religious group is remarkable because, although nearly all members avoid tobacco and alcohol and follow generally healthful lifestyles, about half of the Adventist population is vegetarian, while the others consume fairly modest amounts of meat. This fact allowed scientists to separate the effects of eating meat from other factors. Overall, these studies showed significant reductions in cancer risk among those who avoided meat.⁴

At Harvard University, researchers zeroed in on red meat, finding that individuals eating beef, pork, or lamb daily have approximately three times the colon cancer risk, compared to people who generally avoid these products.⁵⁻⁶

Why Is Meat Linked to Cancer?

Why should meat contribute to cancer risk? For starters, its fat content is virtually always much higher than that of plant products. As we saw in Section One, fatty foods boost the hormones that are linked to common forms of cancer. Even skinless chicken breast harbors a surprising amount of fat, and virtually all meats are totally out of the league of truly low-fat foods—whole grains, beans, vegetables, and fruits.

And, since meat is not a plant product, it never has any fiber at all. The more you fill up on meat, the less room you have for fiber-rich foods. It is also devoid of vitamin C and low in other protective nutrients found in plants.

But meat has other problems. As meats are cooked, cancer-causing chemicals called *heterocyclic amines* tend to form within the meat tissue, as we saw in Section 2. The longer and hotter it is cooked, the more these compounds form. Chicken is by no means exempt from this problem. In some studies, grilled chicken has turned out to have high concentrations of these cancer-causing substances.⁷

Healthier Protein Sources

Some people think of meat as their main source of protein. But it is easy to get plenty of protein without the fat, cholesterol, and other undesirables in meat.

Beans, vegetables, and whole grains, in particular, have more than enough protein. The American Dietetic Association holds that a diet that includes a variety of these healthy plant foods provides all the protein you need.⁸ In years past, some people thought that vegetarians had to eat foods in certain combinations—grains with beans, for example—in order to get adequate protein. However, it turns out that no special combining is necessary. A diet including a variety of beans, vegetables, and whole grains will easily give you more than enough protein, even without intentional combining of foods.

Meal Planning

So how do we replace meat? In many recipes, the legume group comes to your rescue. Beans and lentils, for example, add heartiness to soups, stews, chili, and other recipes. When making burritos, leave out the ground beef and use vegetarian refried beans. Despite their name, low-fat “refried” beans are not really fried. They are actually just mashed pinto beans. You’ll find them in the Mexican food section of your local grocery store. They’re filling and loaded with fiber and protein, and you’ll never miss the meat.

Portabello mushrooms also make great meat alternatives. They have a meaty texture and savory flavor, especially after being marinated in low-fat dressing and then grilled or heated in a frying pan. Use portabello mushrooms as “burgers” at your next barbecue or to fill the meat layer in your lasagna.

Seitan is a fascinating product derived from wheat protein. It has been used to simulate virtually every kind of cold cut or meaty dish imaginable. It has a hearty texture and makes a healthy meat substitute. Wheat protein is also the main ingredient in a number of meat analogs, including spicy veggie pepperoni and sausages.

Soy products have been turned into endless varieties of hot dogs, burgers, and other simulated meats. Many of these products taste so much like the real thing that they will help you break a meat habit. Properly chosen, they will also greatly reduce the fat content of your diet. Some researchers have suggested that soy has special cancer-fighting properties, although investigations in this area are not yet sufficient to support this possibility. For now, soy’s proven virtue is its ability

to pry people away from meat; its overall effect on cancer risk is not yet established.

Recommended Recipes

Asian Fusion Salad (page 94)

Pan-Grilled Portabello Mushrooms (page 105)

Buckwheat Pasta with Seitan (page 115)

Tempeh Broccoli Sauté (page 126)

To Do This Week

1. Check out meat substitutes at a health food store and try one or more of them. Try a sampling of veggie burgers, hot dogs, and deli slices or, if you prefer, the many varieties of beans and lentils.
2. Turn three of your favorite recipes into meatless meals using beans, seitan, mushrooms, tofu, tempeh, or other meat substitutes.

Section 4 References

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