

LATEST RED MEAT & BOWEL CANCER STUDY

Yesterday morning, a study titled [Diet and colorectal cancer in UK Biobank: a prospective study](#) was published in the International Journal of Epidemiology and grabbed New Zealand media's attention given the study involved a New Zealand researcher from the University of Auckland.

The study looked at men and women aged 40-69 years in the UK who were recruited and measured over 5 years up to 2010, with an aim to determine if the current UK meat recommendation of less than 90g/day of red and processed meat was associated with an increased risk of colorectal (bowel) cancer. They also looked at the effects of alcohol increasing risk and fibre intake decreasing risk of getting bowel cancer.

The findings did indicate an increased risk of bowel cancer at a level of 76g/day which is below the UK recommendation. This level also sits above the New Zealand recommendation of up to 500g/week cooked red meat (71g/day) and this close comparison was reported on.

Beef + Lamb New Zealand Inc were approached for comment from several media outlets including the [NZ Herald](#), [NZ Doctor](#), [Radio New Zealand](#) and [NewsHub](#). It was also covered by [Stuff](#) and [TVNZ](#).

The key points that were emphasised in the interviews by our Head of Nutrition, Fiona Windle include:

- The association between red meat and cancer is not new news. Rather, the shift to a holistic lifestyle approach when it comes to reducing cancer risk, is emphasised by the global authority on cancer recommendations, the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) report. When the third expert report titled Diet, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Cancer: A Global Perspective was released last year, it was highlighted that overall dietary and exercise patterns are more important than individual foods or the components that make up those foods, which are favourable to reducing your cancer risk.
- Further, the WCRF downgraded the evidence on red meat from convincing to probable, which highlights there are other factors at play for cancer risk. In other words, rather than looking at meat in isolation, which it is not typically eaten by itself, it is the company that red meat keeps. Is it eaten with plenty of fibre-rich vegetables and wholegrains? Is alcohol, exercise and a healthy body weight part of the lifestyle? Given the many benefits red meat in a healthy diet provides (rich source of highly bioavailable iron, zinc, protein, B vitamins), the authority on cancer recommendations recognises red meat does have a place in the diet, hence its current recommendation of up to 500g cooked/week.
- The evidence supporting the importance of fibre and wholegrains in reducing bowel cancer is strengthening, highlighting the importance of combining nutrient dense red meat with cancer-protective wholegrains and vegetables – it's the whole plate and the proportions that make up that plate – half vege, quarter quality, wholegrain carbohydrate and a quarter quality protein such as grass-fed beef and lamb.
- Based on the last New Zealand adult national nutrition survey published ten years ago, the average New Zealand adult consumes 9.3g/day lamb and 41.1g/day beef. Current industry data (Beef + Lamb New Zealand Economic Service) indicates a downward trend of red meat consumption in New Zealand over the last 10 years. Beef is down 38%, lamb

down 45%, mutton down 72%. Current working figures show in New Zealand, we are eating 17.2kg beef, 5kg lamb and 0.7kg mutton per capita.

- Red meat is an important source of essential nutrients required for growth, brain development and general wellbeing and the amount consumed should meet dietary goals as well as nutrient requirements, particularly in infants, toddlers and women of child-bearing age who are at risk of iron and zinc deficiency.
- Latest statistics indicates New Zealand has concerning rates of iron deficiency including 8 out of 10 toddlers don't meet the recommended daily intake of iron, 14% of children under 2 years are iron deficient, 1 in 14 women are low in iron and over a third of teenage girls don't achieve their daily iron requirements. With red meat being one of the richest source of dietary iron, considerations need to be given to how the removal of red meat from the diet will have implications on the health status of New Zealanders, particularly for those who are most at risk.

What does this mean for our industry?

The link between meat and bowel cancer has been researched for two decades with various mechanisms proposed, yet the science cannot prove meat is a direct cause of cancer, rather it can only show an association, despite the scaremongering headlines. In lay terms, as a comparison, there is may be a correlation between those who eat margarine and divorce rates – this does not mean eating margarine causes divorces. This study should not change current recommendations which draw upon a large body of evidence that does support a moderate amount of red meat in a healthy diet given its numerous health benefits, and Beef + Lamb New Zealand Inc continues to proudly promote this on behalf of our industry, and will be delivering an enhanced health and nutrition programme of activities as part of our strategy over the coming months that we will update you with in due course.

We will continue to monitor and respond to media coverage and consumer enquiries. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Fiona Windle, Head of Nutrition fiona@beeflambnz.co.nz | 021 133 1702.

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