Meat on the Menu

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Recommended Citation
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You need it to build muscle. And it helps to form rich, red blood. Such are the lines we are sold regarding red meat. But muscle building is not dependent upon meat, and the prevalence of anemia in vegetarians is no different to that of meat consumers.

So why is meat preferred by so many people? Could it be taste, or culture? We know that it cannot be economic reasons, since a serving of beans costs only a fraction that of a serving of meat. It is probably unrelated to monotony or a lack of variety in the diet, since there are more than 4,000 cultivars of beans, peas and lentils in the United States. These legumes come in many colors, including green, brown, red, and yellow, black and white. And again, meat certainly does not come out ahead when one is discussing the carbon footprint and environmental concerns.

And how does red meat stack up health-wise? Well, burger lovers beware. If you want to live longer you probably need to cut back on red meat. People who eat red meat every day have a higher risk of dying. In a recent NIH Health Study of half a million people aged 50 to 71 years, red and processed meat intakes were associated with modest increases in mortality. Men and women consuming the highest intake of red meat had a 31–36 percent higher risk for overall mortality, a 20–22 percent elevated risk for cancer mortality, and a 27–50 percent higher risk of cardiovascular disease compared to those with the lowest intake of red meat.

The researchers estimated that 11 percent of deaths in men and 16 percent of deaths in women during the study could have been prevented by reducing consumption of red meat. The red meat in the study included all types of beef and pork, including bacon, cold cuts, hamburgers, hot dogs and steak, as well as meat in pizza, chili and lasagna.

In the Adventist Health Study, regular consumers of meat were 30 percent more likely to develop diabetes. In the Nurses’ Health Study at Harvard, involving almost 70,000 women, diabetes was significantly linked to the consumption of bacon, hot dogs and red meat.

Furthermore, Adventist men who consumed beef three or more times a week had more than twice the risk of a fatal heart attack as Adventist men who never ate beef. Beef consumption also boosts blood pressure levels and risk of stroke. Adventist meat eaters were found to have a 20–30 percent higher risk of fatal stroke than vegetarians.

In another study, Adventist men and women who ate red meat one or more times a week had almost twice the risk of colon cancer as those who never ate red meat. As early as 1890 it was noted that, “Many die of diseases wholly due to meat-eating, when the real cause is scarcely suspected by themselves or others” (Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene, p. 47).

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