

Well-Done Red Meat and the Risk of Breast Cancer

Well Done Meat/Breast Cancer Risk

The risk of a woman developing breast cancer during the "at risk" years (roughly age 45-70) has been variably estimated at between .1% to 1% per year (between one per hundred and one per thousand per year.) Risk factors for breast cancer have been clearly identified, and include family history of breast cancer in a first degree relative (mother or sister), late onset of beginning of menstrual periods, heavy use of alcohol, never having been pregnant, and yes, eating overly done red meat. This new information about breast cancer risk has recently come from the Iowa Women's Health Study. More than 40,000 women ages 55-69 are participating in this ongoing project studying breast cancer prevention and treatment. Overcooking or charring meat results in the production of "heterocyclic amines" which have been identified as "carcinogens" or cancer-causing substances in breast and perhaps other tissues. Researchers therefore looked at the cooking and eating habits of women in this study that developed breast cancer and compared them with those who did not. They found that women who ate red meat, (hamburger, steak and bacon) that was very well done, had 1.5 to 4.5 times the risk of breast cancer as women who ate rare or medium cooked red meat. It didn't seem to matter what method was used to cook the meat. Neither frying, barbecuing, grilling, roasting, deep-frying nor sautéing were unsafe unless the meat was overcooked. The amount of well-done meat consumed also correlated with breast cancer risk: the more well-done meat eaten, the greater the risk. Well-done chicken and fish were not associated with an increased risk. So now we can add another item to our prevention checklist. Red meat should not be over-done, even the edges, as sometimes occurs with rapid cooking on the grill. Of course, the implication is not to eat under-cooked meat; it doesn't have to be bloody to not be carcinogenic. Cooking slowly at lower temperatures will provide doneness without charring. Fish and chicken may be a safer source of well-done protein. If you want a nice crust on that burger, roll it in some cracked peppercorns or cumin or sesame seeds before grilling. And if you're the male barbecue chef of the house, remember to check the grill often. You'll not only protect the ladies; you may even protect yourself from the risk of stomach cancer, which has also been associated with eating charred meats. But red meat or not, well-done or rare, get your mammogram and breast exam done yearly if you are between 45 and 70, and talk to your health care provider about other prevention strategies if you are a woman of any age. Breast cancer is not only preventable; it's curable if detected early enough.