



## Background

Processed meat comes from an era before refrigeration. Nobody could have predicted that adding salt or nitrates to meat as a preservative could cause cancer, just like nobody could have predicted that smoking causes cancer. People usually died of other things well before the age that cancer rates rise. But modern science has unravelled the causal connections for both cigarettes and lung cancer and processed meat and bowel cancer.

Back in the 1990s cancer researchers noticed that people who ate more meat had higher rates of bowel cancer, but it took a decade to nail down exactly how the cancer was caused and to understand that that not all meats were the same. The speculation<sup>1</sup> was that since digesting red and processed meats produced carcinogens similar to those in tobacco smoke, then the impacts in the bowel might mirror those in the lung due to smoking.

By 2007, the science was clear. Red and processed meat were responsible for the link, with processed meat being about three times more potent. As a result, the 2007 report<sup>2</sup> of the World Cancer Research Foundation and American Institute for Cancer Research advised people to avoid processed meat entirely and limit red meat.

More recent analyses<sup>3</sup> indicate that a morning bacon or other processed meat habit of 100 grams per day could increase your chance of bowel cancer by between 70 and 100 percent. You may choose to play Russian roulette with your own health, but should our children be allowed to develop deadly habits that can be tough to break?

Processed meat is typically meat that has been salted, cured, fermented, or smoked. Things like hot dogs (frankfurters), ham, bacon, sausages, corned beef, canned meat, and biltong or beef jerky.

Importantly, studies that have examined the concentrations of carcinogenic compounds in raw meat suggest that

the consumption of these meats, regardless of whether they are unprocessed or uncooked, pose health risks. Cooking or processing simply adds new carcinogens or increases the amounts of already existing ones.

In October, 2015, the World Health Organisation released a declaration<sup>4</sup> on the carcinogenicity of red and processed meat. Processed meat was classified as a Group 1 carcinogen in humans; this is a category which also includes tobacco and asbestos.

## Bowel Cancer in Australia

In 2017 bowel cancer<sup>5</sup> was the second most common cancer in Australia in both men and women. In men, it ranked second after prostate cancer and in women second after breast cancer. It is estimated that there will be 16,682 new cases in 2017 and that we will exceed 17,000 cases in 2018.

## Policy

Processed meat should not be sold to people under 18 years of age. Health warnings should be placed on all processed meat packaging. This policy is consistent with other potent carcinogens like cigarettes and alcohol.

## Key Objectives

To make public policies on processed meat mirror those on tobacco, in particular to:

1. publicly fund education campaigns about the harms of processed meat to human health,
2. mandate health warnings on all processed meat products,
3. ban the sale of processed meat in school cafeterias,
4. ban processed meat in hospitals, and
5. impose a deterrent tax on processed meat.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8631138>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.wcrf.org/int/research-we-fund/continuous-update-project-cup/second-expert-report>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23380943>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.who.int/features/qa/cancer-red-meat/en/>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=60129558547>



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