



---

## MEDIA MYTHCRUSHER

---

### International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) Review of Red and Processed Meat

*In October 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) convened a panel of scientists for 10 days in Lyon, France, to conduct a hazard analysis of the scientific evidence of any possible link between red and processed meat and cancer. While the group initially began its review with 800 studies, only a fraction of those studies – 14 on red meat and 18 on processed meat -- were actually considered. There was also significant disagreement among the panelists about what the evidence showed and its strength. In the end, in a vote that was not unanimous, the IARC panel classified processed meat in the highest hazard group (Group 1) and classified red meat in its second highest hazard group (Group 2A). The IARC panel also released recommended limits for red and processed meat consumption. The findings, published in abstract form in 2015, caused huge controversy, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to calm the coverage with clarifying statements. In late 2017, IARC is expected publish a longer monograph detailing its conclusions.*

**Myth: The IARC Panel Decision was unanimous.**

The IARC Panel vote was not unanimous. Several experts, including at least one U.S. representative, disagreed with the final outcome.

**Myth: IARC conducted a new study.**

IARC did not conduct a study. Instead, it reviewed a small proportion of studies conducted around the world, among different cultures with different genetic profiles, lifestyles and diets.

**Myth: IARC conducted a risk assessment.**

IARC actually conducted a hazard assessment. "Risk" and "hazard" are often used interchangeably, though they mean different things. A hazard is something that could, at some level or under circumstance, cause harm. A risk is the likelihood of that harm occurring or how potent something is in causing harm. An active volcano is a hazard. Living on the slope of an active volcano, one runs the risk of losing their property

in an eruption. IARC's represents a dramatic overreach, draws conclusions, and makes recommendations that should not be made following hazard assessments.

**Myth: IARC's conclusions are based on a review of 800 studies.**

IARC eliminated nearly all of the original 800 studies. Only 14 studies investigating red meat were considered; seven showed a link between meat and cancer and seven did not. Eighteen studies on processed meat and cancer were considered; 12 showed an increased risk, while six did not. IARC also looked only at the theoretical hazards that red and processed meat could pose at some level under a few specific circumstances.

**Myth: IARC considered the totality of evidence.**

IARC didn't review studies that have not yet appeared in the peer reviewed literature.

For example, Harvard’s Pooling Project review of red and processed meat – the largest study ever done involving 725,000 people - which found no relationship between red and processed meat and colon cancer was never considered by IARC. Harvard’s study was presented at the American Association for Cancer Research, but has not appeared in a journal and therefore was not considered.

***Truth: IARC did not consider the nutrition benefits that meat offers.***

In addition, IARC was tasked only with looking at the potential cancer hazards posed by red and processed meat. It was not tasked with considering the nutrition benefits that red and processed meat offer, like preventing anemia, preventing B12 deficiency and more. As a result, the conclusions don’t consider the big picture.

***Truth: Hazard analyses like IARC’s should never be used to quantify risk or recommend consumption or exposure limits.***

Using a hazard analysis to try to calculate risk is like using a sledgehammer to try to create a DaVinci sculpture. It’s a blunt instrument that can’t create precise results, yet IARC generated very specific consumption recommendations, and these are severely flawed.

***Truth: IARC’s categorization of red and processed meats puts these nutrient dense foods in the same categories as tobacco, arsenic and asbestos.***

According to Gregory Härtl , a WHO spokesperson, there is a “shortcoming” of the IARC classification system. Härtl stated that “We do not want to compare tobacco and meat because we know that no level of tobacco is safe.”

***Truth: Only one chemical reviewed by IARC has been cleared as a cancer hazard and many common agents have been given the highest hazard rating..***

IARC has reviewed 1,001 chemicals and agents to determine whether they pose a hazard. Only one chemical has ever been determined to pose no cancer hazard – caprolactam, a chemical in yoga pants. However, agents like sunlight and wood dust have received the highest risk ranking.

***Truth: IARC’s parent organization WHO issued reassuring, clarifying statement following IARC’s monograph release.***

Following the release of the abstract, Gregory Härtl, a spokesman for WHO, told The *Irish Times* the original message from the report was “misinterpreted”. “We’re not saying stop eating processed meats altogether. Do not cut out meats completely as it has nutrients,” he said. “But we do not want to do anything to excess.”

In a tweet, WHO said, “Meat provides a number of essential nutrients and, when consumed in moderation, has a place in a healthy diet.”

In a second tweet, WHO said, “Early 2016, WHO experts will start looking at the place of processed meat & red meat within the context of an overall healthy diet.” To our knowledge, that expert analysis, never occurred.

***Truth: IARC’s animal study working group found that the evidence did not show that fresh and processed meats posed a cancer hazard.***

The IARC Panel divided into working groups. The group that focused on animal studies found insufficient evidence that red and processed meat were linked to cancer.

For more information, contact:

[Janet Riley](#)

Senior Vice President of Public Affairs  
202/587-4245

[Eric Mittenthal](#)

Vice President of Public Affairs  
202/587-4238