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[HEALTH]

Kids risk cancer by eating ham, charity says

The World Cancer Research Fund recommends that children avoid eating processed meat altogether because unhealthy habits acquired while young can have serious consequences later

BY DENIS CAMPBELL
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Parents should not put ham or salami in their children's packed lunches because processed meat increases the risk of developing cancer, experts in the disease are warning.

The World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) wants families to instead use poultry, fish, low-fat cheese, hummus or small amounts of lean meat as sandwich fillings when making up school lunchboxes.

Children should avoid eating processed meat altogether because unhealthy habits acquired while young can have serious consequences later, said the WCRF.

"Including sandwich fillers such as ham and salami could mean children get into habits that increase their risk of developing cancer later in life," the charity said.

"It makes sense for children to adopt a healthy adult eating pattern from the age of five. WCRF advises it is best to avoid it [processed meat] as well as many of the habits we develop as children last into adulthood."

If everyone ate no more than 70g of processed meat — the equivalent of three rashers of bacon — a week, about 3,700 fewer people a year in the UK would be diagnosed with bowel cancer, according to the WCRF.

In 2007 the charity said there was convincing scientific evidence that consumption of processed meat increases the risk of bowel cancer. Although research had only studied its impact on adults, children should avoid it too, said the WCRF.

Marni Craze, the charity's children's education manager, said: "If children have processed meat in their lunch every day then over the course of a school year they will be eating quite a lot of it. It is better if children learn to view processed meat as an occasional treat if it is eaten at all."

The charity also wants parents to avoid giving their children high-fat or high-calorie foods in their packed lunch, such as sugary drinks, because they could help make them overweight. Excess weight is increasingly viewed by scientists as a major contributory factor to cancer, after smoking.

Some high-energy products are promoted as ideal for children's lunchboxes, it points out. For example, Sainsbury's has Peperami in the lunchbox section of its Web site, despite the product containing 44 percent fat.

John Bullock, of BPEX, which represents British meat producers, said: "The amounts of these products in children's lunchboxes will be very small. The WCRF's global study in 2007 said there may be a link between eating processed meat and the risk of cancer, but we need more scientific evidence to tell us definitely whether or not that's the case."

In a separate study published yesterday, Cancer Research says widespread ignorance about the symptoms of cancer is contributing to people dying of the disease.

One in seven people in the UK could not name a single sign of cancer and only small numbers of people named moles (16 percent), weight loss (16 percent of men and 22 percent of women), skin problems (25 percent) and bowel, urinary or toilet difficulties (19 percent), the charity found. In a poll of 3,947 people, 54 percent identified a lump as a being a possible indicator of cancer.

Sara Hiom, of Cancer Research, said up to 5,000 cancer deaths a year could be avoided if cancers were diagnosed earlier. The charity is working with the UK Department of Health on a major project to improve people's chances of surviving cancer through earlier diagnosis, by increasing public awareness of signs and symptoms of the disease.

"We're not expecting people to be able to recall every symptom, but being generally aware of changes that could be a sign of cancer could make a crucial difference for people who do develop the disease," said Hiom.



The label on the packaging of this Starbucks sandwich in New York shows its nutritional value. Last year New York became the first city in the US to make it compulsory for restaurant chains to display food calorie content on menus and packaging, one of the latest government efforts to help ever-portlier customers watch their weight.

PHOTO: AFP

The average male living in Calton, in Glasgow's east end, can expect to die at the age of 53. The area has been devastated by the collapse of the steel and textile industries and 30 percent of its residents are unemployed. PHOTOS: AFP



The Glasgow district where death comes early

Chronic health problems in Calton stem from a lethal mix of a poor diet, poverty, unemployment, violence, plus heavy consumption of alcohol and drugs

BY LUCIE GODEAU
AFP, GLASGOW

The cheery mural that welcomes you to Calton not surprisingly fails to mention the dubious claim to fame of this district of eastern Glasgow — it has the lowest life expectancy in Europe.

Just a few minutes' walk from the designer boutiques of Glasgow's handsome city center, men can expect on average to die at 53 compared with the British national average of 77.

And in an area devastated by the collapse of the steel and textile industries, women can also expect shorter lives than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK, dying on average at 75 compared to 81 nationally.

While men in Glasgow as a whole lead shorter lives than elsewhere in Britain, Calton's social problems are so deep they cause doctors and health officials to despair.

Dr Robert Jamieson has worked in Calton for 22 overstretched years.

"Sadly we have a lot of very unwell patients. It's not unusual to see patients who have heart attacks in their late thirties or early forties, or having strokes as well," he says.

"We have an abundance of obesity, type 2 diabetes and lung problems due to excessive smoking.

"In more affluent areas you have very large geriatric problems, because of the number of patients in their eighties or nineties.

"But sadly very few of our patients live until their eighties. Half the men die before 53 or 54 in this neighborhood."

Jamieson says the chronic health problems stem from a lethal mix of a poor diet, poverty, unemployment, violence, plus heavy consumption of alcohol and drugs — and the bad habits are hard to break from one generation to the next.

In front of the decrepit Belgrove hotel in Calton, a home for single men with nowhere else to go, several residents are hanging around the front door, smoking heavily.

'EVERY SINGLE FACTORY IS GONE'

It is shortly before 10am, but one of the residents announces he is heading to a pub and the bookmakers.

Opposite the Belgrove, a brand-new sports center complete with a gymnasium and football pitches is deserted until a group of children eventually turns up.

In Calton, 30 percent of residents — mainly descendants of Irish or Italian immigrants or from ancestors from the Scottish Highlands — are unemployed.

"It was the area of the industrial revolution and the start of the labor movement in Scotland," says local historian Patricia Clark, who grew up in the area.

"Then came factories based on the steel

industry. But the change [since the 1980s] is unbelievable because every single factory is gone."

In an effort to get to the root of the crisis, the Scottish authorities created the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

By comparing western Scotland with similar post-industrial areas of Europe, such as the Nord-Pas-de-Calais in northern France and the Ruhr in western Germany, researchers at the center have identified a "Glasgow effect."

"We use this term because of the fact that Scotland's health was poorer over and above that which you would expect from having high levels of poverty and deprivation," explains David Walsh, public health program manager.

A hard-drinking culture in Scotland is undoubtedly one cause.

"It's a general problem for the UK, but especially in Scotland, and Glasgow, we have the highest rate of alcohol-related deaths in Europe," Walsh says.

"We have also a massive drug problem. For people in Calton, it's been an issue, but you cannot isolate it from other factors in their life."

But the researchers have yet to identify the exact cause of the high mortality rates in Glasgow; indeed the situation for the most deprived is getting worse.

"For the poorer fifth, life expectancy has actually decreased over 20 years," Walsh concedes.