

Here's to Your Health...What Meat (red, white or deli) Shall You Eat? - Frankly Speaking EP 23

Transcript Details

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Dr. Frank Domino

You're seeing a 44-year-old obese male. He has a history of hypertension and pre-diabetes. He says he heard on the news that eating red meat's no longer good for you, and he's confused as to what to do. Joining me today is Ken Peterson, Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Nursing at The University of Massachusetts Medical School. Welcome to the show Ken.

Kenneth Peterson

Thank you Frank.

Dr. Domino

Ken, what should we be telling our patient about eating red meat? What's the latest data show us?

Kenneth Peterson

Well we've had data for a period of time that recommends against the intake of red meat. The science has been there for a number of years. If we think about just what red meat is composed of, and looking at our health concerns, saturated fat tends to be associated with red meats, higher cholesterol. Those things are probably what we should be considering and paying attention to. I would caution this gentleman to stay away from red meat as much as possible.

Dr. Domino

Okay, great. A recent publication he heard on the news went into extreme detail. What did it say? And how is it changing how we counsel patients?

Kenneth Peterson

There's been a big study actually, a current study that looked at a large cohort of folks from a National Institute of Health study where they collected data over a period of time from the mid 90s up until about 2011. And they were able to help corroborate the data around the dangers of red meat in terms of its effect on health, premature death, in particular around certain diseases, and also specifically look at the association of heme iron and the nitrates and nitrites that are in red meat, and in processed meats. And this big study actually had the power to give us more data on those specifics in terms of those dangers to health.

Dr. Domino

You mentioned the nitrate components of meat. How do people get nitrates into meat, and how does that affect me in the real world? What specifically should I not... What specifically should I avoid?

Kenneth Peterson

With the nitrates and nitrite components, processed foods are really the big concern. And if you think about foods that are maybe more organic, have less chemical components in them... I talk to my patients about walking around the outside of the grocery store and looking at more wholesome foods which we tend to see in the periphery of the grocery store. And when you do that, you think about meats, fruits and vegetables. And in the meat section there's usually meats that tend to be more wholesome, and then there are the processed meats that are in the packages, like sausages and bacon, and those types of things. And those foods are the ones that have higher components of the nitrates and the nitrites.

Dr. Domino

My grocery store has figured that out and put the hotdogs on the outskirts of the grocery store.

This makes really good sense. It is a little sad because I do love my hotdogs, but you're right, it looks like the data shows we should be encouraging people to make that a very uncommon part of their diet, and rather, what they call the unprocessed white meats. What are unprocessed white meats that were deemed to be safer?

Kenneth Peterson

The unprocessed white meats in the study were chicken, turkey, canned tuna, and fish. I would've thought that the canned tuna may have been a little more processed. We do have to think about investigating our food sources a little bit more though because we know that there can be additives even in those types of foods. If we say ground turkey, for example, you might want to be looking towards a ground turkey that is made by a company that has less additives in it, to get it to be as unprocessed as possible.

Dr. Domino

Yeah. This still tells us we have to look at labels and encourage our patients to do the same. There's a commercial on television that tells me that pork is the other white meat. Is pork safe?

Kenneth Peterson

Pork in this study was actually identified in the red meat analysis. There are particular standards that associate pork as a red meat based on the myoglobin component of it, so it's really considered a red meat and not the other white meat.

Dr. Domino

That's good marketing. A number of groups recommend eating organic meats, or non GMO meats. Is there any data there that helps us understand what is good and what is safe and are those meats better?

Kenneth Peterson

Sure. I think a lot of this is fairly new. The introduction of GMOs occurred in about the mid '90s in both the United States and in Europe, and we don't really have the data to show the long term

effects of those types of things. Certainly we know we do have the data and the science supporting GMO foods as safe. Again this goes back to what we were just saying in terms of really analyzing the food itself and whether there are any additives in it or, I guess, thinking about food that comes from certain companies that has been known to be healthier with less additives and maybe more organic, if organic is supposed to be the best food that we can eat.

Dr. Domino

It sounds like to me that we have data that shows genetically modified foods probably are not harmful. We have yet to find data, or we've yet to see data that shows non-GMO foods are better. We have a certain sense that at least organic foods may have less additives or processing going on, but again we don't have any strong data. It seems to me that we should be telling our patient these might be better. But the real key is to look at how things are made, how things are processed and choose wisely.

Kenneth Peterson

Exactly. I think that we really need to encourage our patients to think about getting as close to nature as possible and eating foods that come from the healthiest source.

Dr. Domino

Now he's obese, and he has high blood pressure and pre-diabetes. Is there any other dietary recommendations regarding meat that we should be giving him?

Kenneth Peterson

Well, he should definitely stay away from the red meat component and trying to get to more white meats and unprocessed foods. The study really connected this concern about the heme iron component in red meat and the process components, like the nitrites and the nitrates in terms of its relationship to diseases like diabetes and cardiovascular disease. This particular patient should really work towards a much healthier diet that's associated with the white meat components.

Dr. Domino

I think most of my obese patients tend to have a very high carbohydrate diet. And I think this study really strongly states as you move towards getting more protein and less carbohydrate in the diet, look at white meat to fill that role being chicken, turkey and fish. I do think folks don't always think about having those sources of protein as lowering their mortality risk. They know it correlates with heart disease and maybe high cholesterol, but certainly this study gives us a good direction to tell our patients where to go, what to eat and how to live better and longer. Our practice pointer here is encourage patients to eat more of unprocessed white meats, that being chicken, turkey, fish and even canned tuna. Have our patients look at the label and if there are additives, especially additives associated with nitrites, stay away. Thank you Ken for bringing this paper to our attention. It has the potential to have a huge impact on how we counsel patients and how they look at food.

Kenneth Peterson

You're welcome. Thanks for inviting me.

Dr. Domino

Join us next time when we look at the data concerning the risks and benefits of milk on mortality.