

Consumer Perceptions of the Publicised Link Between Cancer and Eating Red and Processed Meat: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study

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Background

Eating a diet high in red and processed meat has been found to be attributable to an increased risk of some cancers (Parkin and Boyd, 2011). The International Agency for Research on Cancer (2015) classified processed meat as ‘carcinogenic to humans’ and red meat as ‘probably carcinogenic’

In the UK red and processed meats are popular. On average the recommendation for no more than 70g per day red and processed meat is being exceeded by men, whilst women are consuming less than the maximum 70g per day recommendation (Bates et al., 2016; DH 2016).

Encouraging new statistics show that an increased number of British adults are now aware of the cancer risks attached to eating processed meat compared to five years ago (WCRF, 2016). However, reports suggest processed meat remains a menu staple in the UK diet (Mintel, 2016).

The aim of the present study was to investigate consumer intakes, beliefs and perceptions of red and processed meat in relation to the cancer risk.

Methods

A cross-sectional self-administered online questionnaire, including quantitative and qualitative questions was completed by participants recruited through opportunistic sample, from the UK adult population.

Results

The study was completed by n=40 participants, of which 50% (n=20) were male and 50% (n=20) female. Total mean intake scores of red and processed meat were higher in men (0.86), than women (0.64). The difference between gender and red and processed meat intake however, was not statistically significant (p=0.132).

Figure 1: Participant views as to whether the potential cancer risks of red and processed meat were a greater concern to them now than in the past

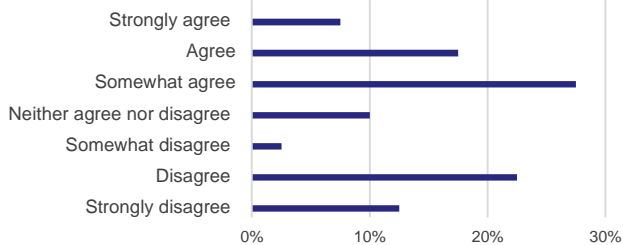
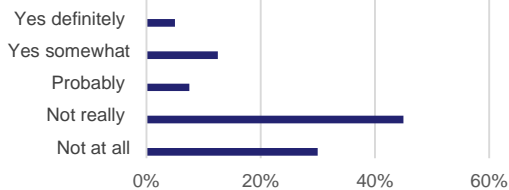


Figure 2: Participant opinions on whether limiting their red and processed meat intake would be difficult



Qualitative analysis revealed a number of key themes, which suggest why some participants felt they would find it difficult to limit their intake of red and processed meat:

Dietary norms

- “It’s a strong part of my everyday diet” (ID 18)

Taste

- “I enjoy the taste of it so would miss it from my diet” (ID 15)

Household diet

- “My partner likes to eat a lot of red and processed meat, so I tend to eat more of what he eats...” (ID 40)
- “Family meals tend to have red meat” (ID 39).

Figure 3: Participant choices of what would help them to reduce their intake of red and processed meat

Researcher suggested interventions	Total	Men	Women
Price of other foods (such as white meat and fish costing less)	60% n=24	32.5% n=13	27.5% n=11
More guidance on red and processed meat in supermarket meat aisles	47.5% n=19	22.5% n=9	25% n=10
Leaflet including tips for cutting down red and processed meat, meal ideas and recipes	22.5% n=9	7.5% n=3	15% n=6
Online resource to learn more about healthy eating	20% n=8	7.5% n=3	12.5% n=5
Phone app that could show if you were eating too much red and processed meat, with alternative food and meal suggestions	20% n=8	7.5% n=3	12.5% n=5

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study suggests beliefs that limiting red and processed meat intake would not be difficult. However, barriers to change exist surrounding red and processed meat as a staple in the UK diet. The price of other foods, such as white meat and fish costing less, and more guidance in supermarket meat aisles, were highlighted as factors that could be helpful to reduce consumption of red and processed meat.

The study highlights that more could be done to raise awareness of the cancer risk associated with red and processed meat, which might encourage reduced intakes within the DH (2016) recommended maximum 70g per day amount. Further research in this area could potentially help to implement future interventions that increase knowledge and awareness of the cancer risk associated with high red and processed meat intakes.

Dietitians are well placed to promote the message regarding the DH (2016) recommendation for red and processed meat, where appropriate in their practice.

References

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