



RESEARCH NEWS

Processed meat is linked to asthma symptoms, study finds

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Eating cured and processed meat such as ham and salami seems to be associated with worsening asthma symptoms, a study in the journal *Thorax* has found. Four or more weekly servings of processed meat seemed to have the greatest effect on symptoms.¹

The researchers used data from the Epidemiological Study on the Genetics and Environment of Asthma (EGEA), a prospective study that has been tracking asthma patients from five cities in France. The current study included 971 people with a mean age of 43, of which 49% were men.

Dietary intake was assessed using food frequency questionnaires. Intake of cured meat such as ham, sausage, and salami was classified as either low (<1 serving a week), medium (1.0-3.9 servings), or high (≥4 servings).

At baseline, 42% of the participants had ever had asthma, 51% were never smokers, 35% were overweight, and 9% were obese. The average cured meat intake was 2.5 servings a week. After a mean follow-up of seven years, 513 participants (53%) reported the same asthma score as at baseline, 20% had worse symptoms, and 27% had fewer symptoms.

Among those who ate less than one weekly serving, the proportion of participants with worsening asthma symptoms was 14%; among those who ate 1.0-3.9 servings the proportion was 20%; and in those who ate four or more servings the proportion was 22%.

After the researchers took into account other factors such as smoking and physical activity, participants who ate the most cured meat were 76% more likely to experience worsening asthma symptoms than those who ate the least (multivariable

odds ratio 1.76 (95% confidence interval 1.01 to 3.06)). Being overweight, which has previously been linked to worsening asthma, accounted for 14% of this association. The researchers said that this suggested “a deleterious role of cured meat independent of body mass index.”

The study was observational, so no firm conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect. It also relied on participants’ memory when filling in the food frequency questionnaires.

The researchers said that cured meat has a high nitrite content that can cause inflammation of the airways, but they added that more research was needed to help understand the potential mechanism.



1 Li Z, Rava M, Bédard A, et al. Cured meat intake is associated with worsening asthma symptoms. *Thorax* 2016. doi:10.1136/thoraxjnl-2016-209375.

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