

BIOMEDICINE

Another meaty link to cancer

Before you fire up the grill this summer, consider the latest bad news about red meat.

Recent reports have tied British beef to the human version of mad cow disease (SN: 4/13/96, p. 228). Now, U.S. researchers suggest that a diet heavy on steak and hamburger may increase the risk of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the immune system. In this disease, malignant cells proliferate in the lymphoid tissue, usually the lymph nodes and the spleen.

James R. Cerhan, an epidemiologist at the University of Iowa College of Medicine in Iowa City, and his colleagues studied more than 35,000 women age 55 to 69 who had no history of cancer when the study started in 1986. The women began by filling out a questionnaire on diet.

During the 7-year study, 104 of the women developed non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. From a statistical analysis, the researchers discovered that women who ate more animal protein had a higher risk of developing the disease. Women who said they ate 36 or more 4- to 6-ounce servings of red meat per month had a 73 percent greater risk of this cancer than women who ate fewer than 22 servings. Hamburger, they found, could be blamed for most of the increased risk.

Carcinogens called heterocyclic amines form as red meat cooks (SN: 4/23/94, p. 264). These compounds or an unknown contaminant spread by grinding beef may boost the risk of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the team reports in the May 1 JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION.

Does the link between red meat and this cancer hold for men? "We don't have any strong reason to think the biology of the cancer is different in men versus women," Cerhan says.

The incidence of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma has risen rapidly since the 1970s. Further study of the red meat and cancer connection may solve this deadly puzzle, Cerhan says.