

# ‘Sun Scare’ Purveyors Sizzling Over Bacon?

**THE $64,000** question in the science of indoor tanning has nothing to do with anything you’d ever find in a sunbed salon. Look no further than your kitchen.

The World Health Organization in 2016 shocked many in the public health community by adding “processed meat”—yes, that includes bacon—to its list of substances it considers carcinogenic to humans. So bacon sits among the big-hitters tobacco, plutonium and arsenic in that often-misunderstood category—a category that has also included UV exposure from the sun or a sunbed since 2009.

The consumer has no idea what that list means. That’s because birth control pills, red wine and some artificial sweeteners have all graced that list before. In short, being called a carcinogen does not mean a substance is carcinogenic in its intended dose, or even everyday doses or exposure. (Even the U.S. government says that right in its definition of ‘carcinogen’ that no one ever talks about).

So when UV was added to WHO’s list in 2009 (It had been on the U.S. government’s list since 2000) no one was talking about that all-important caveat. And no one was talking about the fact that, among Group 1 Carcinogens, only one is something you absolutely need in order to live.

We’d all be dead without UV exposure.

But when the WHO added bacon—a dietary staple in North America that, depending on whose stats you believe, more than half of us consume—WHO felt it necessary to issue a four-page “Q&A on the carcinogenity of the consumption of red meat and processed meat.”

In that document was this explainer:

***Q. Processed meat was classified as carcinogenic to humans (Group 1). Tobacco smoking and asbestos are also both classified as carcinogenic to humans (Group 1). Does it mean that consumption of processed meat is as carcinogenic as tobacco smoking and asbestos?***

***A.*** *No, processed meat has been classified in the same category as causes of cancer such as tobacco smoking and asbestos (IARC Group 1, carcinogenic to humans), but this does NOT mean that they are all equally dangerous. The IARC classifications describe the strength of the scientific evidence about an agent being a cause of cancer, rather than assessing the level of risk.*

Let’s be clear: You don’t need bacon to live (some great punch-lines notwithstanding). You absolutely DO need sunlight and UV exposure. But no such explainer was ever issued for sunlight or UV exposure by anyone. Anti-sun groups continue to muddy up that important distinction and improperly compare UV to tobacco and plutonium.

Society is figuring out now that they had their heads buried in the sand on that one.

For bacon, the WHO was careful to acknowledge, “Eating meat has known health benefits,” but made no such statement about UV exposure.

Even National Public Radio came to the defense of bacon. “We should note, we’re talking relative risk here, and the chances of developing colorectal cancer are fairly low to begin with.”

What are the chances? It gets even more interesting when you go all the way to the details: WHO said the reason bacon and processed meat were added to the list is that eating 1.8 ounces of it daily increases your risk of colorectal cancer by 18 percent.

Compare that to sunbeds: Eating bacon has a greater statistical connection (18 percent vs. 16 percent) for a greater number of people (more than half of the population, verses about 5 percent) to a cancer that is more deadly and kills more people than skin cancer. And you don’t need bacon to survive (as opposed to UV and sunlight).

So that double-standard is out there now for everyone to see, and it can’t be explained away. Bacon is riskier, if you believe the stats (and that’s another topic entirely) but is being defended with caveats that only make our case for responsible UV exposure stronger.

Now that’s a story with sizzle.

Joe



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