

Received by email on October 10, 2016

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NTP is requesting information on four substances that have been nominated for possible review for future editions of the RoC; three of these substances are also under consideration for evaluation of non-cancer health outcomes (Federal Register Vol 81; no. 175. Friday September 9, 2016). One of the nominations is consumption of red meat: cancer and non-cancer health hazard evaluations. NTP has requested information on scientific issues important for prioritizing and assessing adverse health outcomes. A critical scientific issue to be considered in the prioritization of a nomination for the RoC is the weight of the available evidence that can be used to provide a robust scientific summary key to reaching a recommendation. The evidence base for red meat is too limited and premature to provide the quantity or rigor of scientific data required to warrant an evaluation at this time.

On October 26, 2015, IARC published a summary of their findings regarding the assessment of the association of cancer with consumption red meat or processed meat (The Lancet Oncology 2015). IARC classified the consumption of red meat as probably carcinogenic to humans (Group 2A). The largest body of epidemiological data concerned colorectal cancer. Data on the association of red meat consumption with colorectal cancer were available from 14 cohort studies. They concluded that chance, bias, and confounding could not be ruled out for the data on red meat consumption, since no clear association was seen in several of the high quality studies and residual confounding from other diet and lifestyle risk is difficult to exclude. The Working Group concluded that there is limited evidence in human beings for the carcinogenicity of the consumption of red meat. Limited evidence means that a positive association has been observed between exposure to the agent and cancer but that other explanations for the observations (technically termed chance, bias, or confounding) could not be ruled out. There is inadequate evidence in experimental animals for the carcinogenicity of consumption of red meat. Nevertheless, the working group opined that there is strong mechanistic evidence for the role of factors such as heme iron from red meat and nitrosamine formation, genotoxicity and oxidative stress as hazards in the production of colorectal cancer. On the basis of what they cited as strong mechanistic evidence, the Working Group classified consumption of red meat as “probably carcinogenic to humans (Group 2A)”.

An examination of publicly available data that investigates the mechanistic evidence cited by IARC as a justification for the assignment to Group 2A does not support the interpretation of the Working Group. The current evidence that links a mechanism of action for heme in red meat to the production of colorectal cancer is weak. A review of publicly available

in vitro assays, animal models and clinical trials (reference list attached) shows that many of the studies contain methodologic flaws as well as over-reaching conclusions based on limited evidence in models that are not appropriate to utilize in risk assessment. A lack of appropriate studies documenting dose-response and thresholds for the mechanisms investigated precludes assignment of these mechanisms as relevant under conditions of more modest exposures from red meat eaten as part of a usual diet. Studies that are currently available for review cannot be used to extrapolate to a mechanism or a health effect that would be manifested at usual red meat intakes. In conclusion, the data base is not sufficient to support nomination of red meat to the RoC.

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