Red meat is a staple of the typical American diet, often linked to wealth, but a recently published report puts a scientifically based cautionary note on that affluence standard. A recent report in the Archives of Internal Medicine summarized the results from two long term observational studies involving healthcare personnel, the Healthcare Professionals Follow Up Study with 37,700 men, and the Nurses Health Study with 83,600 women, whose subjects provided detailed lifestyle records over the course of 22 and 28 years respectively. These data are compelling because of the design of the studies and the large numbers of subjects.

As with prior population studies, the eating of red meat was associated with an increased risk of coronary disease, strokes, diabetes and some types of cancer. Even when correcting for the fact that people who ate red meat were less active, more likely to be smokers, drinkers and heavier, the absolute risks remained significantly increased. One additional red meat serving in a day resulted in a 16% increased risk of cardiovascular death and a 10% increased risk of cancer death and a 12% increase in overall mortality.

The reasons why red meat may be a health problem are many. The saturated fat in the meat is what provides much of the flavor, so the more marbled the meat, the more popular the cut. But the more fat in the diet, the greater negative effect on the blood fats. Fat is more than twice as calorically dense as carbohydrates and protein. So more fat in the diet means a greater caloric load that results in overall weight gain. Weight gain is associated with high blood pressure, blood fat abnormalities and diabetes. And rather than the more healthful unsaturated fat seen in plant based liquid oils and fish, the red meat has saturated fat that has an unequivocal high correlation of adverse cardiovascular and even cancer outcomes. Moreover, the high heat involved with cooking red meat may create more highly reactive chemicals that are carcinogens, or cancer causing compounds. Factor in the gravies, sauces, salt and the associated carbohydrates including starches and alcohol that are often associated with diets tied to red meat, and we have a recipe for cardiovascular dietary mayhem. This may be fine for my invasive cardiovascular colleagues who do the angioplasties, stents and bypass surgeries as well as the hospitals that profit from your bad choices. But as a preventive cardiologist that tries to minimize repair care in favor of preventive care, I submit that this report further validates that avoiding the avoidable is a far better strategy.

It is unlikely given the imbedded place of red meat in our society from fast food to fine dining, that we will see red meat eliminated from our diets. But life is about intelligent choices, and we can choose to reduce the number of red meat servings and their portion sizes. In the rest of the world where the cattleman’s cut in not the norm, red meat is used as a condiment, not as the main component of a meal.

The conclusions we can derive from these data are that lifestyle decisions we make can have significant impact on mortality. Specifically, dietary choices should include less red meat and saturated fats, more fish and poultry, more whole grains, vegetables and fruits. Less total calories by restricting portion size would also be prudent. With the increasing emphasis in reducing healthcare costs and promoting wellness and prevention, these lifestyle changes will pay great dividends for not only you and your family, but our society as well.