

Barbecue Basics

Q: Does grilling cause cancer? My husband loves to barbecue meat, but I've heard that it can promote cancer. Should we be concerned?

A: It all depends on how you cook it. Prevention's Dr. Andrew Weil explains:

Does he char the meat? That could be a problem: National Cancer Institute studies found that ingesting heterocyclic amines (HCAs), which form in the blackened crust when meat is cooked at very high temperatures, ups your risk of developing colorectal, pancreatic, and breast cancers. Another concern is the toxicity of charcoal-briquette lighting fluids, so consider switching to a gas or electric grill.

To eliminate HCAs, encase meat in foil: It'll cook through but won't burn on the outside. Or simply cook the meat longer at a lower temperature.

My tastiest trick: Marinate in a mix that contains herbs such as ginger, garlic, and turmeric. A study by the Cancer Research Center of Hawaii found that steaks bathed overnight in a garlic and turmeric marinade had 50% fewer harmful compounds when cooked for 15 minutes. Rosemary extract (a flavorless liquid available at health food stores) brushed on beef also significantly reduces HCA levels.

An odd but savory tip: Add 1 part chopped tart cherries to 9 parts ground beef. Doing this reduced HCAs by 69 to 78%, according to a study conducted at Michigan State University in 1998, probably because cherries contain antioxidants that hinder HCA formation. I don't eat burgers, but my friends who do tell me that the flavor is just fine.

Q: What about veggies on the grill? What's the best way to prepare them?

A: Grilling concentrates the flavors of vegetables, making it easy to eat more of them. Here are Prevention's tips on how to slice and sear like a world-class pro:
Be gentle with greens: Indirect heat ensures that delicate veggies like endive don't char. Brush lightly with oil and place to the side of the heat source.
Roast potatoes and beets: Veggies with skin that gets removed before eating benefit from steady heat under the coals. Spread embers out in a flat bed next to a live fire. Bury vegetables in embers and cook under tender. Rinse off ash and remove skin before serving. Wrap up carrots and parsnips: For a fast, sophisticated side dish, toss veggie slices with oil and seasonings and spread out on foil. Top with more foil and crimp edges shut. Cook over direct, high heat until tender. Carefully open packet to avoid burns.
Caramelize zucchini, mushrooms, and more: Use direct heat for veggies with a high water content. Brush ½-inch-wide slices lightly with oil. Cook on grill until tender. For smaller vegetables, use skewers.