Is uncured bacon nutritionally superior to cured bacon with sodium nitrite? Are nitrites safe? Is it worth the extra cost for uncured meat?

What is sodium nitrite?

Sodium nitrite is a preservative used to produce the pink color in cured meats such as ham and bacon. It helps keep meats from becoming rancid and developing off-odors and flavorings during storage. It is important for food safety because it delays the development of a deadly toxin produced by bacteria called Clostridium botulinum, a condition known as botulism.

If it is so helpful, why do so many people claim that it is unhealthy? Do an Internet search for “nitrite” and you will find many sites that tell consumers to avoid nitrites and nitrates in food. (Nitrates are also a food preservative with a chemical formula very similar to nitrite. The body makes nitrate from nitrite.) Health concerns are based on reports that these chemicals are associated with development of cancer in animals, and therefore humans, because they form dangerous compounds when eaten. The Environmental Protection Agency has concluded that the relationship between nitrites and cancer is unclear. The Food and Drug Administration says sodium nitrite may be safely used in foods in recommended amounts. Meanwhile, there is emerging evidence that the chemical changes that happen when nitrites are eaten may have beneficial effects in cardiovascular disease and may lower blood pressure.

What should you do?

It would be very difficult to eliminate nitrate since about 80 percent of the nitrate we consume comes from vegetables. About 25 percent of nitrites come from drinking water. Only 5 to 20 percent comes from meats. So, unless a person eats large amounts of bacon and other cured meats, choosing a nitrite- and nitrate-free product would have little effect overall for the extra money you pay. On the other hand, both cured meats and uncured meats (with no sodium nitrite) have a large amount of sodium and are best eaten in small amounts.

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