Science Panel Seeks to Calm Concerns About Well Cooked Meats

By ACSH Staff — November 18, 1998

New York, NY, November 18, 1998. Consumers should use caution when interpreting a new study on the possible hazards of eating well cooked meats, say scientists from the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH).

This study, published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, compared the preparation and consumption of meats by women who did and did not have breast cancer. Women who regularly ate well done red meats were shown to have a higher risk of breast cancer than those who consistently preferred their meats cooked rare or medium. The authors of the study point to heterocyclic amines compounds formed in meats cooked at high temperatures (by broiling or grilling, for example) until well done as the likely culprits.

But scientists from ACSH warn consumers to put the results of this new study into perspective. First of all, states ACSH President Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, a single study does not prove anything. Scientists do not consider a hypothesis supported until the results have been replicated by independent researchers. An editorial accompanying the report makes that very point: the journal’s editors note that this study alone is not sufficient to establish a causal link between eating well done meat and developing breast cancer. And Dr. Whelan notes that while some heterocyclic amines are known animal carcinogens, that does not necessarily mean that they are human carcinogens as well.

Consumers would be best advised to follow well substantiated lifestyle guidelines for optimizing their health and preventing breast cancer, says ACSH Director of Nutrition Dr. Ruth Kava. In other words,: Don’t smoke; avoid obesity; stay physically active; eat a varied, balanced diet that includes fruits and vegetables, and consume all foods in moderation; follow protocols for breast self examination and mammography.

As far as dangers from consuming meats or, indeed, any other foods are concerned, consumers should keep in mind that the risk of bacterial illness is considerably higher than the risk posed by heterocyclic amines or traces of animal carcinogens formed in cooking. Consumers should therefore be sure to handle, store, and cook all foods properly.

The American Council on Science and Health is a consortium of over 250 leading scientists and physicians. For more information, contact Dr. Ruth Kava or Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.