Grill It Safely

Aside from our rain showers, the weather is definitely turning to grilling season. The aromas of grilled chicken, grilled ribs, grilled fish, and of course burgers and steaks are filling neighborhoods. There are homes where almost every dinner comes in from the back patio, hot off the grill. Then there are those families who might not even own a grill or who use it very rarely. What’s the difference? For at least some of those who won’t grill, a big reason is the fear of cancer. There is good evidence that grilling meat produces a variety of cancer-causing chemicals. Some people would rather avoid grilled meats than do anything that might increase their risk of cancers.

But such a complete avoidance of grilled meat is not necessary. You can grill your steak or burger and still be safe. Besides, grilling meat is not the only cooking method that produces these chemicals. Any cooking at very high heat, even frying and broiling in the oven, can have the same effect. Also, beef is not the only meat that produces them. Pork and lamb often do, but even chicken or fish could. The worst combination seems to be fatty meat cooked at very high temperatures to a well-done stage. So here are the tricks to have your steak and enjoy it without the fear of cancer.

Start with your choice of meat. Whichever kind of meat you want, select lean cuts, and trim off as much of the visible fat as you can. Fat that drips onto the coals or hot elements produces some of these cancer suspects as it burns. The smoke of burning fat can carry these cancer-causing chemicals, whether you eat the meat or not. Trim off the fat so that it won’t burn and there’s not much to drip. If you do get some
dripping and burning, don’t stand in the smoke. Move to the other side of the fire so you don’t fill your lungs with risky chemicals.

Second, plan far enough in advance that you have time to marinate the meat. Marinades are not just to improve flavor or tenderness, although they definitely do both. But research has found that meats marinated in acids produce as much as 90% less toxic chemicals. Just that alone should make the meat taste better! Beer, cider, vinegar and citrus juices are good acid choices. Use mustard, brown or white sugar, and the herbs or spices your family enjoys to add the flavor you want.

For cooking, the best route is to pre-cook the meat in the oven or microwave, then just finish it on the grill to add flavor. When you do put it on the grill, use a lower heat and don’t put the meat directly over the heat. If you’re using charcoal, wait until the coals burn down a little. Push them to one side and put your meat on the other side.

Turn the meat often enough to avoid charring or blackening. Use a thermometer to determine when the meat is done enough for safety and remove it from the heat then. Overcooking not only toughens most meats but is when the cancer-causing chemicals are produced. Your target is 145°F for beef, 160°F for pork, and 165°F for poultry. Don’t trust the color to decide if it’s done, because color is not accurate.

If you’ve learned to love grilled veggies, go for it! Vegetables, veggie burgers and even tofu slices do not produce the same cancer-chemicals because they don’t have the same proteins or fats.

Here’s an easy dinner dish to do on the grill, either as a side or the main course. It’s a best bet for the cook because there are no pans to scrub later. If you want to wrap 8 individual servings you can personalize the contents or the seasonings.
Easy Grilled Veggies

¼ cup oil  2 tsp Italian (or Mexican) seasoning
1 tsp salt  3 large ears fresh corn on the cob
2 medium zucchini  1 medium yellow squash
1 large sweet onion  1 large green pepper
8-10 cherry tomatoes  1-4oz can whole mushrooms
3-4 Tbsp butter or margarine

Cut corn into 2-3 inch pieces. Wash zucchini and squash and cut into ¼ inch slices. Cut pepper into large dice, slice onion and drain mushrooms. Combine oil, salt and seasoning in large bowl. Add vegetables and toss until coated. Lay out 2 sheets of heavy-duty foil about 30 inches long, one on top of the other. (Or lay out 8 smaller sheets, double thickness). Place vegetables on foil and dot with small pieces of butter. Wrap foil around vegetables and fold several times to seal tightly. Grill over medium heat on covered grill for 10-15 minutes, turn and continue cooking another 10-12 minutes, until corn is tender. Serves 8.