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Presentation

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Any discussion of child nutrition must include a discussion of sources of high quality protein, and for America, as for most of the world, meat is the source of quality protein. Although some of the proteins available in meat can be found in smaller amounts in other foods, there is no other single food product with quite the nutritional profile of meat and especially red meat. As well as protein, red meat contains essential B-vitamins and other important minerals, like iron, zinc and selenium. In short, it's an ideal choice for the diets of young people, who require adequate protein and nutrients for body and mind development, as well as muscle growth.

But I am not here to repeat what you already know about the nutritional value of meat, the facts about which have been very well established, but rather I'm here to talk safety.

The school lunch program, which serves about 100,000 schools, public and private, is a really amazing program that provides healthful food to kids all across the nation. I grew up on school lunches and, while I wasn't always pleased with the menu, I never went hungry.

Meat was a component of nearly every school meal I ate as a kid and although a lot has changed about these meals, that's pretty much true today. That's why the product specifications for meat available in the program are very high. In fact, USDA's rigid standards assure it some of the safest meat in the country. Not only does the government require a high nutritional health standard, but an exceedingly high standard for safety, as well.

Companies who violate the rules are subject to swift action by the government. And as one recent, well-publicized recall shows, those actions can put a company out of business overnight.

You may have heard scary misinformation about processed meats containing nitrites, which are used in meat to prevent spoilage and protect against *Clostridium botulinum*. This protection against botulism is essential for meats cooked at relatively low heat, such as hot dogs.

Even so, only 10 percent of human exposure to nitrites comes from meat. 90 percent comes from vegetables, notably spinach, beets, radishes, celery, and cabbages. This is how you see “uncured” processed meat products on the market today. Those manufacturers simply replace the nitrites in their hot dogs with something like processed celery, which is so high in nitrites that it cures the meat. Some of these “natural” alternatives can be even higher in nitrites than the salts they replaced.

Not that that’s necessarily a bad thing. It must be noted that the American Medical Association has stated that no association between nitrites and cancer can be confirmed despite extensive study. The fear that nitrites are carcinogenic is not only unsubstantiated, but recent research published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences suggests that nitrites may in fact help protect the heart and reduce the severity of heart attack.

Bottom line? Meat is safe and nutritious, and a great choice for growing children. That’s my message here today. Thank you.