

Cutting meat consumption may cause 'serious harm', academics warn

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There is a lack of robust evidence to confirm link between meat eating as part of a healthy diet and the development of Western diseases, according to a paper that contends there are a wide range of benefits delivered by meat that are not always easily obtained from plant materials.

A large reduction in meat consumption, such as has been advocated by the EAT-Lancet Commission, could 'produce serious harm', according to academics.

Mainstream dietary recommendations now commonly advise people to minimise the intake of red meat for health and environmental reasons.

But a new paper argues that the claims about the health dangers of red meat are 'improbable in the light of our evolutionary history' and 'far from being supported by robust scientific evidence'.

*"Although meat has been a central component of the diet of our lineage for millions of years, some nutrition authorities—who often have close connections to animal rights activists or other forms of ideological vegetarianism, are promoting the view that meat causes a host of health problems and has no redeeming value," wrote Frédéric Leroy and Nathan Cofnas in the journal *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*.*

"Meat has long been, and continues to be, a primary source of high-quality nutrition. The theory that it can be replaced with legumes and supplements is mere speculation."

They complained that organizations attempting to influence policy makers to take action to reduce meat consumption, were using evidence based on 'misrepresentations of the science'.

“Well-meaning yet overemphasized and premature recommendations may eventually cause more damage than benefit, not only physiologically but also by unjustifiably holding individuals accountable for their health outcomes,” they said.

“We contend that a large part of the case against meat is based on cherry-picked evidence and low-quality observational studies. The bald claim that red meat is an ‘unhealthy food’ is wildly unsupported.”

‘Simplification of complex science’

Mainstream nutrition discourse often portrays meat as ‘a health disaster’, according to the authors. But the evidence from observational studies suggesting that eating meat brings detrimental health effects needs to be interpreted with care, they said, as they don’t prove causation.

Diets are often difficult to disentangle from other lifestyle factors, for example. *“It has been shown that Western-style meat eating is closely associated with nutrient-poor diets, obesity, smoking, and limited physical activity.”*

In addition *“confusion is generated by sensationalist misrepresentations of the scientific evidence in mass media...it is not good practice to infer a causal connection to meat eating from such weak and confounded associational data.”*

The nutritional benefits of meat

The authors listed the wide range of benefits delivered by meat that are not always easily obtained from plant materials. *“A major asset of meat is of course its high protein value with especially lysine, threonine, and methionine being in short supply in plant-derived diets...It brings in B vitamins (with vitamin B12 being restricted to animal sources only), vitamins A, D, and K2 (particularly via organ meats), and various minerals with iron, zinc, and selenium being of particular importance.”*

Plants, they added, are a suboptimal source of the long-chain omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA present in animal sources. And despite being overlooked in most nutritional evaluations, meat also contains various bioactive components such as taurine, carnosine as well as conjugated linoleic acid, carnitine, choline, ubiquinone, and glutathione. *“These components can offer important nutritional benefits, for instance with respect to the optimal development of cognitive functions.”*

Meat, they concluded, contributes to the physical and cognitive development of infants and children. *“In the elderly, sufficient meat intake can prevent or improve malnutrition and sarcopenia, also improving health-related quality of life.”*

Avoiding animal products is a ‘risk you shouldn’t be taking’

Meat avoidance, meanwhile, leads to a loss of nutritional robustness. Pellagra remains relevant today for poorly planned vegan diets, they said. While advocates of vegetarian/vegan diets will usually admit that these diets must be ‘well-planned’ in order to be successful, which involves regular supplementation with nutrients such as B12, Leroy and Cofnas said in reality many people are not diligent about supplementation, and ‘will often dip into deficient or borderline-deficient ranges if they do not obtain nutrients from their regular diet’.

"Our main concern is that avoiding or minimizing meat consumption too strictly may compromise the delivery of nutrients, especially in children and other vulnerable populations," they wrote.

"In our opinion, the official endorsement of diets that avoid animal products as healthy options is posing a risk that policy makers should not be taking."

Meat consumption in the Netherlands is rising

Meanwhile, a new study by Wageningen University concluded that [meat consumption in the Netherlands is on the rise for the first time since 2009](#). According to the study, in 2018, Dutch consumers ate on average 77.2 kg of meat per person, a 0.8% increase over the 76.6 kg consumed in 2017.

The research was commissioned by Dutch animal rights charity Wakker Dier. Anne Hilhorst of Wakker Dier said the rise in meat eating was *"very disturbing news"*. However, the report's findings are at odds with a report earlier in 2019 from market agency IRI which noted that supermarkets are selling less fresh meat. Hilhorst suggested the discrepancy was down to people eating less meat in the home, but more of it in restaurants. *"As hospitality spending has risen sharply, it is likely that this plays a role,"* she said.

Source

'Should dietary guidelines recommend low red meat intake?'

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