Is Red Meat Good? Why Experts Flip-Flop

By Dr. Joseph Mercola | mercola.com

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Most nutritional guidelines are based on research involving participants' self-reported eating habits; while these show associations, they rarely are able to establish causation
- Stearic acid found in grass-fed beef is linked to mitochondrial health, decreased heart disease, and cancer risk
- Although most people eat just the muscle meat, eating parts of the entire animal, including organ meat and

connective tissue, raises your nutrition as these are more nutrient-dense, and are high in amino acids, CoQ10, minerals, and fat-soluble vitamins
- Farmers have demonstrated that regenerative farming practices and rotational grazing significantly lower emissions compared to conventional animal operations and these practices improve soil health

Your health is highly dependent on nutrition and the function of your mitochondria. Mitochondria are the little powerhouses in each cell; when they're not functioning well, your health is likely to be suboptimal. Mitochondria affect longevity, and problems with mitochondria have been linked to neurodegenerative diseases.

Lowering your exposure to pesticides and GMOs, particularly in meat and dairy, will help you enjoy a healthier life. A cow's body is designed to eat and process grass, but the majority of beef and dairy in the U.S. comes from cows finished on grain. Unfortunately, this is the way of unethical, unhealthy and environmentally devastating concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) that dominate industrial agriculture.

There are a number of diet-based ways to sustain your mitochondria, and stearic acid found in grass-fed beef may be one of the best. However, recent advice has recommended consumers steer clear of red meat. In 2014, consumers ate the lowest amount of red meat recorded since 1960.[1]

This may have been the result of several factors, including recommendations from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics claiming a plant-based diet may reduce your risk of heart attack and stroke,[2] and a report by the World Health Organization concluding red meat is probably carcinogenic to humans.[3]

What About the Conflicting Information on Beef?

In a new analysis of past research data, scientists looked at what effects a higher intake of red meat might have on cardiometabolic disease and cancer in adults. They examined trials that compared diets lower in red meat against those evaluating diets higher in red meat. The data were reviewed independently by two teams and researchers concluded:

> *"Low- to very-low-certainty evidence suggests that diets restricted in red meat may have little or no effect on major cardiometabolic outcomes and cancer mortality and incidence."*

The outcome was called "jarring" by Vox.[5] Most media outlets are asking how scientists can flip-flop on the place red meat may safely hold in a nutritional plan. As Nina Teicholz, executive director for Nutrition Coalition, writes in the Los Angeles Times, most recommendations have been made with the aim of limiting saturated fats. She says:[6]

> *"A recent paper in the journal BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine consolidates 17 separate reviews showing these fats, whether from meat, cheese or coconut oil, have no effect on mortality. And if red meat causes disease by some mechanism other than saturated fat, no strong body of evidence has emerged to support it."*

As Teichholz points out,[7] most nutritional guidelines are based on epidemiological studies that ask individuals to self-report over a long period of time. The researchers then observe and report on eventual health outcomes. While these types of studies may show an association between two factors, they rarely establish causation.

The Opposition Was Ready Before the Study Was Released

I should note that a few days after the study came out, The Washington Post revealed that the study's authors had undisclosed conflicts of interest, in that the research group they worked with was receiving money "from a university program partially backed by the beef industry." Study authors responded that their research was completed before the funding became available.[8]

Before the study was even released, though, one group[9] had already galvanized supporters and filed a federal petition. They claimed there were false statements made, called the review an advertisement and requested the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) permanently prohibit the journal "from disseminating or causing the dissemination of the advertisement at issue."

Additionally, they requested the FTC require the magazine to issue a retraction and corrective statement. A second press release on the same day questioned whether the new study might be "clickbait,"[10] a reference to fake news while ignoring evidence that unprocessed meat did not contribute to premature death.

In 2012[11] they commended a study from the Harvard School of Public Health in which researchers found a 13% increase in the risk of dying prematurely for those who ate unprocessed red meat every day. Compare this to what is known about eating processed meats – such as hot dogs, sausage and bacon – which increases the risk by 20%.

However, Harvard Medical School[12] published a piece in which it was noted that the results of the study were "somewhat less scary," since the relative risk was reported as opposed to

absolute risk. The absolute risk of death in women eating one serving of unprocessed meat a week compared to eating two servings of unprocessed meat a day increased from 0.7% risk to 0.85% risk of death.

The increase in men went from 1.23% to 1.3% with an increase in eating unprocessed meat. In the same article from Harvard Health Publishing, they discussed a Japanese study in which researchers found no connection between eating a moderate amount of meat and premature death. In her piece in the Los Angeles Times, Teicholz concluded:[13]

> *"According to government data, despite a 28% reduction in red-meat consumption in the U.S. since 1970, some 60% of Americans now suffer from at least one chronic disease in which diet is a major risk factor. The Annals review is exactly what we need: dietary cause-and-effect information based on strong science."*

Cheap Meat and Dairy Are Expensive

In exchange for purchasing cheap meat and dairy products, you may be paying a hefty price on the other side. Pollution from CAFOs damages both the environment and human health. Secondly, meat produced in CAFOs is lower in stearic acid. In a study published in 2018 researchers identified[14] "stearic acid as a dietary metabolite that is sensed by our bodies to control our mitochondria."

In addition, they noted it helps decrease the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer. In research involving flies, scientists found the insects had healthy mitochondria when stearic acid was added to their food, but they had fragmented mitochondria when fatty acid levels were kept low.[15,16]

Grass-fed beef, coconut oil, and cocoa butter are some of the healthiest sources of stearic acid. An analysis from the University of Illinois compared grass-fed beef to the grain-fed variety and found saturated stearic acid was 36% higher in grass-fed beef than in grain-fed beef. The researchers commented:[17]

> *"Thus, in equally fatty cuts of beef, there would be a higher content of saturated fatty acids in the grass-fed beef. In many traditional diets where the fattiest cuts and the fat itself were sought out, intake of these saturates would likely be considerably higher."*

Head to Tail Balances Your Nutrition

Early hunters opted to eat everything they hunted, from head to tail. This included organ meat and connective tissue. There's a good chance their reliance on this practice provided them with energy and optimal health. Currently, it's often just the muscle meat that's sought out for the dinner table, rather than the organs and other body parts that might appear unsavory.

A hearty steak hot off the grill may seem more appetizing than hearts, livers, and kidneys. However, as I have discussed in the past, many of these organs are more nutrient-dense with high amounts of minerals, fat-soluble vitamins and protein.

These are often the densest source of nutrition, rich in amino acids and CoQ10. You feel fuller longer, and eating organ meat consumes a good source of choline, which is an essential nutrient for your brain. This practice also helps you build and retain muscle mass more easily. Another benefit is that organs are often less expensive since they are not as sought-after as other meat.

Regenerative Farming Practices Raise the Standard

Animals are an integral part of regenerative farming practices that help achieve healthy soil in which to grow crops. As noted above, eating pasture-raised beef is also healthier for the consumer. In this illuminating interview with Will Harris, owner of White Oak Pastures in Bluffton, Georgia, we discuss his pioneering efforts involving grass-fed animals.

He's a promoter of what he calls "kinder, gentler agriculture." He points out that in nature, a cow has a life span of nearly 24 years. Those raised in feedlots are typically slaughtered at 17 months, at which point they weigh 275 pounds more than the typical mature cow. Harris says this is unnatural, and the obscenely obese creature would fail to survive in nature. He adds:

> *"If they were left beyond their 17 months in that feedlot environment where they're gaining 4 to 5 pounds a day, they wouldn't live very long. I've never done that experiment, but I'm sure they wouldn't live to be 4 years old. That's the difference.*
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> *When you eat one of these (grass-fed, pastured) animals, you're eating a healthy animal in the prime of their life. When you eat that feedlot animal, you're eating an obese creature that is dying of all the diseases of sedentary lifestyle and obesity that kill people.*
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> *A cow in a factory farm does not have a great life. A hog in a factory farm has a worse life. And I don't think there's a factory farm animal that has as bad a life as a chicken in a factory farm."*

Regenerative Farming: Key to Saving the Soil and Health

A second widely-publicized argument against eating beef is that conventionally grown beef is a major contributor to the Earth's carbon footprint and all sorts of pollution. It's important to note that farms like Harris's are not contributing to local pollution, but are likely a big part of the answer.

It's CAFOs that produce large amounts of animal waste while feeding grain and antibiotics to animals that are supposed to be eating grass. These operations are destroying local environments and damaging the food supply. One ranch in New Mexico uses 33 small pastures on an 18,000-acre ranch to rotate grazing; this practice is called adaptive, multi-paddock grazing.

This simple plan has allowed the rancher to increase the number of cattle and the biodiversity of native grasses across the pastures. Rancher Nancy Ranney says,[18] "Not only is it a viable alternative, but it's also a necessary management practice if you want to keep grasslands healthy and you want to have healthy soils."

This process reduces erosion of the grassland ecosystem where uninterrupted trampling and eating can reduce a prairie to weeds and bare soil. When rotating grazeland operates on a natural range, it fosters a healthy ecosystem and stores large amounts of carbon in the soil, as Harris' farm has demonstrated.

In an analysis of White Oak Pastures,[19] soil samples were independently evaluated to quantify carbon sequestration. A life cycle assessment of the farm operation was also conducted. They found White Oak Pastures' beef production had a net total emissions loss of 3.5 kg carbon dioxide per kg of

fresh meat. In comparison, conventionally produced CAFO beef has a positive 33 kg of emissions for every pound of fresh meat.

Another study[20] in the southern Great Plains region found similar results. In a study currently underway, scientists are finding that while cows produce greenhouse gases through digestion, managed grazing produces a carbon-neutral system.[21] As the positive results of rotational grazing are becoming more widely accepted, one survey[22] of ranchers in California and Wyoming found two-thirds are using the program.

The potential for this type of program to significantly impact the climate is unknown, but in one review in Nature[23,] it was reported that carbon sequestration through managed grazing has the greatest potential to reduce animal agricultural carbon emissions. See my past article, "This 1950s Video Demonstrates Where Best Food Comes From" for where to find grass-fed meat.

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