

first word

The case for cutting back on red meat



Eating prime steak may be the 'macho male' thing to do, but choosing a vegetarian option might be better for your health and for the planet.

Evidence is accumulating that a high intake of both processed and unprocessed red meat is associated with higher mortality from cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer, as well as hepatic, renal and respiratory disease. Although our closest primate relatives, such as gorillas and chimpanzees, are primarily vegetarian, humans have a long history of meat consumption. Historically, in ancient European agricultural societies meat was eaten only once per week, with an intake rarely more than 5–10kg per year. Current average meat consumption in developed and rapidly developing countries is now more than 10 times greater than that at 110–120kg per person per year.

The increased mortality risk is linked to excessive nitrate and haem iron intake, but other factors, such as the increased consumption of both saturated fat and N-nitroso compounds, as well as cooking-related carcinogens, may also play a role.

Livestock and land used to produce animal feed are now calculated to occupy around 30% of the earth's arable surface. The shift from animal protein as a modest supplement to a plant-based diet, to its current position of providing around one fifth of our total energy requirement, has a number of adverse consequences for human health. These include accelerated sexual development as a result of meat and fat consumption itself, or arising from endogenous or exogenous growth promoting hormones in meat; the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria as a consequence of antibiotic use to promote the growth of livestock; and the higher risks of infected food from animals raised using inappropriate feeding practices. The use of multiple animal vaccines in a factory farm has

been shown to result in the emergence of a virulent strain of influenza virus as a result of the recombination of two attenuated strains.

There is also evidence that the scramble to produce ever more meat for human consumption is resulting in significant damage to the planet. This includes the depletion of aquifers, as the production of 1kg of meat protein requires more than 100 000 litres of water, and global warming from the excessive production of methane and nitrous oxide from cattle. The combination of rainforest destruction for livestock grazing and the production of greenhouse gases by livestock contribute more to climate change than do the use of fossil fuels for transport.

Another reason for all of us to shift away from the consumption of red meat is the animal cruelty associated with the meat and dairy industries. Consider the calves reared in crates, cows separated from their offspring and milked excessively before being slaughtered, not always humanely, for the production of hamburgers, as well as the factory farms where the animals never see a pasture, or even the light of day.

Eating prime steak may be the 'macho male' thing to do, but choosing a vegetarian option or some line-caught fish might be better, not only for human health, but for the health of the planet!

ROGER KIRBY, EDITOR

BLOG

Should we all be cutting back on red meat?

Read the accompanying blog and leave a comment at:

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