

Principles for eating meat and dairy more sustainably: the 'less and better' approach



This briefing aims to provide practical guidance towards choosing less and better meat and dairy. We offer a set of eight principles to help navigate the complexities involved, together with advice and a guide to labels and certification schemes for choosing better.



The food on our plates sustains us but is also making too many of us – as well as our planet – sick. We need diets that are not just healthier but more sustainable too. The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement commitments to keep global temperature rise within safe limits cannot be met without including dietary change as a priority solution. Crucial to achieving this goal, is to reduce the high level of meat and dairy foods that we eat in high consuming countries such as the UK by at least 50% by 2030.

Climate change is not the only challenge. Livestock production is a driving force behind wide-scale global biodiversity loss. Additionally, it is increasingly recognised, that predominantly plant-based diets with smaller quantities of animal products are needed to address the spiralling health care costs from obesity and diet-related disease including heart disease, cancers and type 2 diabetes.

For Eating Better, eating 'less' is only part of the picture. Choosing 'better' for the meat and dairy that we do eat, can provide added benefits for farm animal welfare, the environment, fair resource use, health and for farming livelihoods. But what does this mean in practice?

There are not always straightforward answers. How do we weigh up the evidence on greenhouse gas emissions, against the value of nature and landscape, animal welfare concerns, and health issues? Often there are positive links between public health and the health of the environment, but not in all circumstances. There can also be trade-offs. Greenhouse gas (GHG) efficiency can be improved by large scale intensive production systems – but at what cost to animal welfare and local pollution? We also need to consider how people's individual priorities, for example towards animal welfare or health, will also shape preferences.

Despite these complexities, our simple message of 'less and better' is becoming increasingly recognised. Eating Better encourages a culture where we place greater value on the food we eat, the animals that provide it and the people who produce it. Moderating our meat and dairy consumption – whether red, white or processed – while also choosing 'better' that is naturally fed, has a known provenance and is produced to high animal welfare, environmental and quality standards can help support farming livelihoods without being more expensive for the public.

Eight principles for choosing less and better

1. Choose better for the climate

Raising animals for food is a key driver of agricultural greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and land use change including deforestation in some areas of the world, accounting for 14.5% of total GHG emissions globally. In the UK we eat a lot of meat and dairy, with consumption around twice the global average. This comes with a high carbon footprint. To meet the Paris Climate Change targets, evidence points towards the need to at least halve our consumption by 2030.

Choosing better for the climate means shifting the balance of our diets towards more plant-based foods, including plant based sources of protein such as beans and pulses; while eating less meat of all types. Choosing meat from 'pasture-fed' animals can help lock carbon into the soil, but this only makes sense in the context of consuming considerably less overall.

2. Choose better for animals

The drive to produce meat and milk ever more cheaply has led to greater intensification of meat and dairy production and practices that can severely restrict animal behaviour and compromise animal health and welfare.

Choosing better for animals means choosing meat and dairy from well managed production systems that enable natural behaviour, support good health and provide a natural diet. Unless we have direct experience of conditions on a particular farm, the simplest way of doing this is choosing products with a credible animal welfare certification.

3. Choose better for nature

The UK intensive pig and chicken industries are heavily reliant on imported feed, particularly soya, as a source of protein. The expanding need for animal feed globally is a major cause of deforestation and loss of high value natural habitats, in addition to being one of the major drivers of global climate change. Indoor livestock production is a significant cause of ammonia pollution (a cause of poor air quality) and water pollution. In some areas, extensive and well-managed beef and sheep production at low stocking densities is an important conservation tool in managing semi-natural habitats.

Choosing better for nature means choosing livestock products that have a diet based around local food sources and home-grown feedstuffs, using for example European native legumes, which can help reduce our reliance on unsustainable soy.

4. Choose better for feeding the world fairly

One-third of the calories produced worldwide, and half of all plant protein is fed to animals. This requires a vast amount of land and feeding food to animals rather than people has implications for food security too. It has been calculated that halving world consumption of grain-fed meat could free up enough food to feed 2 billion more people.

Choosing better for feeding the world fairly means shifting diets away from meat and dairy overconsumption in high consuming individuals and countries. This would ensure resources are used more efficiently and fairly. A 'livestock on left-overs' approach would see lower levels of production and consumption, with animals reared in foraging systems or fed on crop by-products and food waste/surplus. Ruminants can be kept on grasslands where this brings additional benefits.

5. Choose better for health

While meat and dairy are sources of protein and can provide valuable nutrients, a growing body of public health guidance recommends moderating meat consumption. Diets rich in red meat (beef, lamb, pork) and, in particular, processed meats have been linked to higher incidence of coronary heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes and cancers. There is some evidence that the meat and milk of animals fed a natural diet contains higher levels of beneficial nutrients, particularly in relation to fats.

Choosing better for health means shifting towards more plant-based diets would have health benefits for the majority of the population. In particular health guidance recommends minimising the consumption of processed meats and keeping red meat (beef, lamb and pork) to less than 70 grams a day. Choosing meat and dairy products from animals that have a varied natural diet can help towards making overall diets more nutritious.

6. Choose better for responsible antibiotic use

Antibiotics are commonly used, particularly in intensive pig and poultry production, to prevent or treat disease where there is confinement, overcrowding, lack of cleanliness or other stressors. To help preserve the effectiveness of antibiotics important to human medicine, the World Health Organisation recommends drastically reducing the use of antibiotics in food-producing animals, including placing severe restrictions on the use of all critically important antibiotics and phasing out all routine use in healthy animals.

Choosing better for responsible antibiotic use means choosing products that require minimal antibiotic use in their production. In practice, this means avoiding products produced intensively. Livestock that are raised with higher standards of animal welfare are typically more resilient to illness and require significantly lower amounts of antibiotics in their production.

7. Choose better for cutting waste

In the UK, households waste around 570,000 tonnes of fresh meat each year, 46% of which is avoidable with a value of about £1,300 million, together with the embedded carbon and other resources used in its production. Our demand for particular cuts of meat also means that maximising the balance of a carcass is a challenge for producers. We also 'waste' huge amounts of resources feeding grain and protein crops to animals rather than to people.

Choosing better for cutting waste means valuing meat as a precious resource, making the most of each carcass and reducing the amount of wasted edible food. We encourage the purchase of appropriate amounts of meat as well as making the most of the meat, including trying less used cuts of meat.

8. Choose better for livelihoods

Eating Better encourages a culture where we place greater value on the food we eat, the animals that provide it and the people who produce it. The ability of farmers and producers along the supply chain to make a viable economic return is a key element of creating a food system that can support better meat consumption.

Choosing better for livelihoods means choosing meat and dairy from smaller scale, higher standard producers. Choosing meat and dairy with a known provenance can reconnect producers and their customers such as through farm shops, box schemes, farmers markets and independent butchers. Eating Better also wants to see farm subsidies post-Brexit support farmers that are delivering benefits for wildlife, farm animal welfare, and the environment.

Are all types of livestock the same?

All types of meat have a relatively high carbon footprint, and are generally significantly more emissions intensive than non-animal products. Meats from ruminant animals – cows, sheep and goats – contribute more direct greenhouse gases than meat from monogastric animals – poultry and pigs. But how the animals are reared – particularly how they are fed – also has a significant impact on overall emissions. Hence it is not enough simply to swap between different types of meat.

What about dairy products?

Owing to the relatively high water content of milk, emissions associated with one kilo of milk are low relative to those from the same amount of beef. However, milk also contains less energy and protein per gram. On the other hand, cheese has a relatively high GHG intensity (8-10 times that of milk, depending on the hardness of the cheese) meaning that cheese can have a higher impact (per kilogram) than pork.

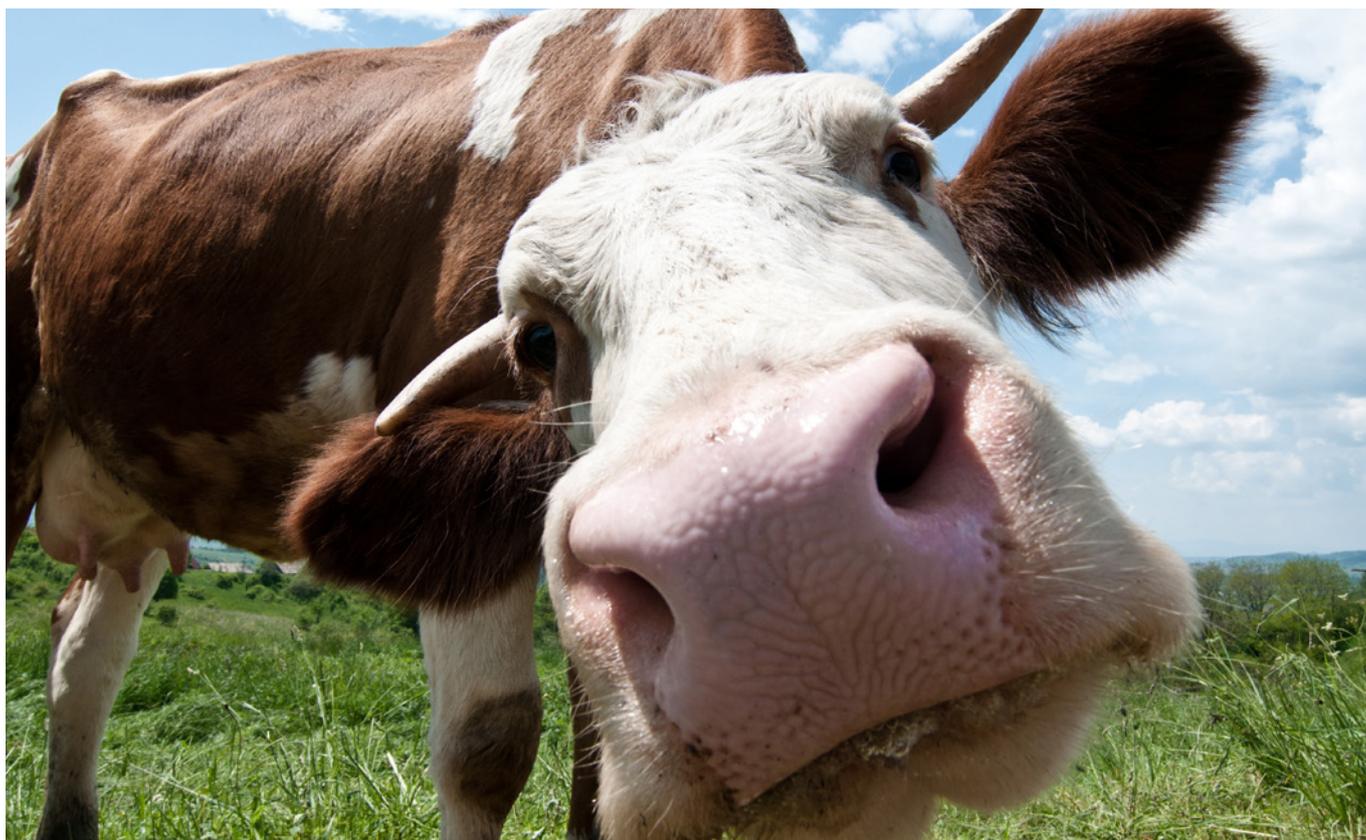


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What about pasture-fed grazing systems?

Maintaining and building soil carbon stores is vital for addressing climate change and permanent pasture for grazing livestock is one way to achieve this. The extent to which this will occur is highly variable and dependent on local conditions such as climate, geography, soils and type of grassland.

Sequestration also diminishes over time and it is unlikely that grazing livestock can fully offset emissions in this way unless kept at very low stocking densities, as overgrazing may lead to soil degradation, erosion and compaction, which significantly diminish the ability of grasslands to store carbon.

Keeping land as pasture for grazing can also have other benefits, for wildlife, for landscape value and for animal welfare. For these reasons, we consider that choosing 'better' includes meat and dairy from pasture-based production systems, but only when they are eaten as part of lower meat diet overall.

How to choose: Labels and certifications

Short of getting to know the particular circumstances of individual farms, and purchasing direct from producers, at farm shops and farmers markets, assurance schemes and labels are often the only way of identifying 'better' meat and dairy products.

Schemes vary considerably in their scope, status and standards. Organic standards, for example, are enshrined with EU Organic Regulation, apply to all EU organic production as well as imports, and cover the whole life of an animal.

Other terms described on labels are less stringent and may only apply to the way an animal is farmed just for part of its life. For example, a beef product marketed as 'grass-fed' may have come from cattle reared on grass/forage for anything between 51% to 100% of its life. The description 'free range' is a broad term and different schemes have different standards.

Currently, there is no label that delivers neatly across all our better meat and dairy principles, although organic comes closest. In our full report we provide details of a range of 'better' meat and dairy labels and set out why they can help the consumer to choose better meat and dairy.



Who is Eating Better?

Eating Better is an alliance of over 50 civil society organisations working to build consensus and develop collaborative practical approaches to engage policy makers, food businesses and civil society to catalyse shifts towards healthy and sustainable eating patterns. Eating Better encourages a culture where we place greater value on the food we eat, the animals that provide it and the people who produce it.

This briefing is a summary of Eating Better's fully referenced report: **Principles for eating meat and dairy more sustainably: the 'less and better' approach**. The report and this summary can be downloaded at <http://bit.ly/lessandbettermeat>.

The recommendations outlined in this briefing paper have been developed in collaboration with civil society organisations and with farming interests. The views expressed in this briefing are those of Eating Better.

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