

Poor rural population had best diet and health in mid-Victorian years

March 8 2018

Poor, rural societies retaining a more traditional lifestyle where high-quality foods were obtained locally enjoyed the best diet and health in mid-Victorian Britain. A new study, published in *JRSM Open*, examined the impact of regional diets on the health of the poor during mid-19th century Britain and compared it with mortality data over the same period.

The peasant-style culture of the rural poor in more isolated regions provided abundant locally produced cheap foodstuffs such as potatoes, vegetables, whole grains, milk and fish. These regions also showed the lowest [mortality](#) rates, with fewer deaths from pulmonary tuberculosis, which is typically associated with better nutrition.

The study's author, Dr Peter Greaves, of the Leicester Cancer Research Centre, said: "The fact that these better fed regions of Britain also showed lower [mortality rates](#) is entirely consistent with recent studies that have shown a decreased risk of death following improvement towards a higher Mediterranean dietary standard."

Dr Greaves explained: "The rural [diet](#) was often better for the poor in more isolated areas because of payment in kind, notably in grain, potatoes, meat, milk or small patches of land to grow vegetables or to keep animals."

"Unfortunately, these societies were in the process of disappearing under the pressure of urbanisation, commercial farming and migration. Such

changes in Victorian society were forerunners of the dietary delocalisation that has occurred across the world, which has often led to a deterioration of diversity of locally produced food and reduced the quality of diet for poor rural populations."

Dr Greaves added: "Conversely, in much of rapidly urbanising Britain in the mid-19th century, improvements in living conditions, better transport links and access to a greater variety of imported foods eventually led to improved life expectancy for many of the urban poor."

Provided by SAGE Publications

Citation: Poor rural population had best diet and health in mid-Victorian years (2018, March 8) retrieved 5 May 2024 from

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