

Consumers cite health concerns, cost as reasons they eat less meat

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Two out of every three participants in a U.S. consumer survey report that they are eating less of at least one type of meat, according to a study from researchers at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future,

based at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Meat consumption in the U.S. exceeds recommended levels, with significant consequences for public health and the environment. To better understand consumer attitudes and behaviors related to reducing [meat](#) consumption, researchers collected survey responses from a nationally representative sample of 1,112 U.S. adults ages 18 and older. The study, conducted in 2015, is thought to be the first of its kind to collect responses from U.S. consumers about the foods they choose to eat instead of meat during meatless meals.

The study was published in the July issue of the journal *Public Health Nutrition*.

"Many Americans continue to have strong preferences for meat, but this survey adds to a growing body of evidence that a significant portion of the population may be purposefully reducing their meat consumption without becoming vegetarian or vegan," said Roni Neff, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Bloomberg School's Department of Environmental Health and Engineering who led the study and directs CLF's Food System Sustainability and Public Health Program. "We hope our findings will be useful for the development of awareness campaigns and other interventions geared towards helping consumers reduce their meat consumption in a way that is good for their health, their grocery budgets, and the environment."

For purposes of the survey, researchers defined meat reduction as eating less [red meat](#), processed meat, poultry or seafood over the last three years. Participants between the ages of 45 to 59 were twice as likely to reduce consumption of one or more types of meat as those 18 to 29-years-old, followed by those over age 60. Women were more likely than men to report reducing meat consumption. Household income was also associated with reduced meat consumption: the lower the income

level, the greater the likelihood of reporting reduced meat consumption.

Respondents with incomes lower than \$25,000 were more likely to report cutting their overall meat consumption than those with household incomes greater than \$75,000. Researchers also observed that the parents of children under age 18 were less likely to reduce their overall meat consumption than non-parents.

The most commonly reported reasons participants gave for cutting meat consumption were cost and health concerns. Few respondents—12 percent each—said they had reduced their meat consumption out of concern for animal welfare or the environment. Key reasons survey participants cited for not reducing meat consumption included the perception that meat is necessary for a healthy diet, and that meals are incomplete or boring without meat. Researchers say these findings reveal opportunities for educating consumers about appealing and nutritious plant-based meals and raising awareness of the environmental impacts of meat production.

The researchers note that the responses offer useful insights into which meat products consumers say they are cutting back on. Fifty-five percent of respondents reported reducing their consumption of processed meat, and forty-one percent reported reducing the amount of red meat in their diets. Of those who reported reducing red and processed meat, 37 percent said they had increased their poultry or seafood consumption. The most commonly reported approach to reducing meat consumption was buying less meat (64 percent), followed by smaller portion sizes (56 percent), meatless meals (42 percent), meatless days (32 percent), and avoiding meat altogether (9 percent).

The study also provides data on what people say they eat in meatless meals. The most frequently reported foods eaten in meatless meals were vegetables, followed by cheese and other dairy products, and eggs.

Beans, nuts, tofu, and imitation meats were less frequently eaten during meatless meals, the study found. As a result, opportunities exist for meat reduction campaigns to build consumer interest in eating foods such as beans and nuts as alternatives to meat.

"Our survey results suggest that [public health](#) messages on the benefits of reducing red and processed [meat consumption](#) may be reaching and resonating with many U.S. consumers, but more work remains to be done," said Neff. "Priorities for meat reduction campaigns should include addressing common misperceptions about meatless meals, and promoting alternatives that [consumers](#) enjoy and that are affordable, healthy, and environmentally friendly. They should emphasize that meatless meals can be interesting and taste good, and could also provide resources like recipes with other options."

More information: Roni A Neff et al. Reducing meat consumption in the USA: a nationally representative survey of attitudes and behaviours, *Public Health Nutrition* (2018). [DOI: 10.1017/S1368980017004190](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980017004190)

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