

Your plant-based diet could really help the planet

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(HealthDay)—Worried about climate change? You can do something

about it every time you lift your fork, a new study suggests.

Folks can reduce their personal carbon footprint by eating less [red meat](#), nibbling fewer sweets and cutting back on tea, coffee and booze, according to the findings.

"We all want to do our bit to help save the planet," said senior researcher Darren Greenwood, a senior lecturer in biostatistics at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. "Modifying our [diet](#) is one way we can do that."

And the nice part—the foods that are best for the Earth are also really good for your health, in general.

"Most food that's healthy for us is likely to be better for the planet, too," Greenwood said.

It's a timely message as we enter the holiday season of big meals with family and friends.

For the study, Greenwood and his colleagues performed a detailed analysis of more than 3,000 different foods, assessing the [greenhouse](#) gas emissions generated during the production of each source of sustenance.

Meat was linked to 32% of diet-related greenhouse gas emissions, which didn't surprise environmental experts.

Fossil fuels are utilized in the pesticides and fertilizer used to grow [animal feed](#), and waste gases and manure from livestock also add to meat's carbon footprint, said Sujatha Bergen, health campaigns director for the Natural Resources Defense Council's health and food division.

"Animals like cows and sheep produce a lot of methane, which is a very

powerful greenhouse gas," Bergen said. "Beef is actually the biggest source of emissions in the U.S. diet. If every American cut on average one burger a day from their diet, it would be like taking 10 million cars off the road a year. It's a huge climate impact."

But the researchers also found that other foods had a large impact on the climate:

- Drinks like tea, coffee and alcohol contribute 15% of diet-related greenhouse gases.
- Dairy products account for 14% of food's carbon footprint.
- Cakes, cookies and sweets contribute almost 9%.

Overall, nonvegetarian diets had greenhouse gas emissions 59% higher than vegetarian diets, the researchers found.

Men's diets produce 41% higher greenhouse gas emissions than women's diets, primarily due to greater meat intake, the study authors said.

Lastly, people who limited their intake of saturated fats, carbohydrates and sodium to recommended daily amounts contributed less [greenhouse gas emissions](#) than people with less healthy diets.

The study was published online Nov. 24 in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

"Reducing our meat intake, particularly red meat, can make a big difference," Greenwood said. "But our work also shows that big gains can be made from small changes, like cutting out sweets, or potentially just by switching brands."

Tea, coffee and chocolate are linked to deforestation, which reduces the planet's ability to process excess atmospheric carbon, said Bergen and Geoff Horsfield, government affairs manager for the Environmental

Working Group.

The foods identified by the researchers also tend to require lots of water, degrade the soil, need refrigeration and transportation to market, and are sold in packaging that adds to their carbon footprint, Greenwood said.

Agriculture is actually undermining the success we're having in reducing carbon emissions from other industries, Horsfield explained.

"U.S. methane emissions have decreased 18% since 1990, but [methane emissions](#) from agriculture have increased by over 16% over that same time period," Horsfield said. "While we address methane from things like [natural gas](#) and oil, methane from agriculture is only increasing."

More information: Holly L. Rippin et al, Variations in greenhouse gas emissions of individual diets: Associations between the greenhouse gas emissions and nutrient intake in the United Kingdom, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0259418](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0259418)

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