

# Are plant-based meats really better for us than real thing?

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New research shows that although plant-based meat products are

generally healthier than meat equivalents, they can be higher in sugar and are often lacking important nutrients found in real meat.

Lead author Maria Shahid said that despite the growing popularity of plant-based meat substitutes—often based on health reasons—there is very little evidence of the actual health impact of these products.

"Both plant-based and processed meats mostly fall into the ultra-processed category, so this raises concerns about their role in a [healthy diet](#)," she said.

"While we found plant-based meat products were generally healthier than their processed meat equivalents, healthier alternatives would still be lean unprocessed meats and legumes, beans and falafel."

Plant-based meats, or meat analogs, are designed to mimic meat products and act as a substitute for meat protein. They are commonly made from plant-based vegetable protein (soy protein, wheat protein, pea and rice protein, or a combination) or fermentation-based fungus protein (mycoprotein).

With [consumer demand](#) driving the proliferation of new products emulating the structure, texture, taste and appearance of traditional meat products, sales in Australia alone are estimated to rise to almost A\$3 billion by 2030.

George Institute researchers used the Institute's FoodSwitch database to assess and compare the nutrient content and nutritional quality of plant-based meat analogs and their equivalent meat products available in Australian supermarkets. The types of meat products and plant-based meat analog equivalents studied were burgers, meatballs, mince, sausages, bacon, coated poultry, plain poultry, and meat with pastry.

They found that using the Australian Government's Health Star Rating system, overall, plant-based meat analogs were found to have a healthier nutritional profile compared with equivalent meat products and their [energy content](#) was marginally lower.

While the [protein](#) content was similar in both categories, plant-based meat analogs on average had significantly less saturated fat and sodium, as well as more fiber than [meat products](#).

But of the 132 plant-based meat analogs analyzed, only 12 percent were fortified with key micronutrients essential for health that are found in meat—iron, vitamin B12 and zinc.

George Institute dietitian Dr. Daisy Coyle said that in Australia, processed meats have been classified as discretionary foods in the [national dietary guidelines](#) and have been linked to various types of cancer, so consumers are advised to limit these meats as part of a healthy diet.

"But it isn't as simple as a straight swap—solely relying on meat alternatives as a direct replacement for meat could lead to iron, zinc and B12 deficiencies over time if you are not boosting your intake of these essential nutrients from other sources or taking supplements," she said.

"To guard against this, make sure you are consuming other animal proteins such as eggs, cheese, milk, yogurt and/or rich plant-based sources of iron including dark leafy vegetables such as spinach and broccoli, as well as tofu, nuts and seeds, and beans and legumes."

"Until we know more about the health impacts of plant-based [meat](#) analogs and have recommendations on how to include them as part of a healthy balanced diet, its best to eat them in moderation along with other plant-based proteins such as bean patties, falafel and tofu, or if you are

not vegetarian or vegan, unprocessed lean meats and seafood," Daisy added.

The study is published in the journal *Nutrition & Dietetics*.

**More information:** Hannah Melville et al, The nutritional profile of plant-based meat analogues available for sale in Australia, *Nutrition & Dietetics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1747-0080.12793](https://doi.org/10.1111/1747-0080.12793)

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