

Four ways to cut down on meat when dining out and still make healthy choices

August 17 2024, by Laura Marchese and Katherine Livingstone



Eating a range of colors is one way to ensure variety. Credit: [Mikhail Nilov/Pexels](#)

Many of us are looking for ways to eat a healthier and more sustainable diet. And one way to do this is by reducing the amount of meat we eat.

That doesn't mean you need to become a vegan or vegetarian. Our [recent research](#) shows even small changes to cut down on [meat consumption](#) could help improve health and well-being.

But not all plant-based options are created equal and some are [ultra-processed](#). Navigating what's available when eating out—including options like tofu and fake meats—can be a challenge.

So what are your best options at a cafe or restaurant? Here are some guiding principles to keep in mind when cutting down on meat.

Health benefits to cutting down

Small amounts of lean meat can be part of a healthy, [balanced diet](#). But the majority of Australians [still eat more meat](#) than recommended.

Only a small percentage of Australians (10%) are vegetarian or vegan. But an [increasing](#) number opt for a flexitarian diet. Flexitarians eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, while still enjoying small amounts of meat, dairy, eggs and fish.

Our [recent research](#) looked at whether the average Australian diet would improve if we swapped meat and dairy for plant-based alternatives, and the results were promising.

The study found health benefits when people halved the amount of meat and dairy they ate and replaced them with healthy plant-based foods, like tofu or [legumes](#). On average, their dietary fiber intake—which helps with feeling fuller for longer and digestive health—went up. Saturated fats—which increase our blood cholesterol levels, a risk factor for [heart disease](#)—went down.

Including more fiber and less saturated fat helps reduce the risk of [heart](#)

[disease](#).

Achieving these [health benefits](#) may be as simple as swapping ham for baked beans in a toastie for lunch, or substituting half of the mince in your bolognese for lentils at dinner.

How it's made matters

For a long time, we've known processed meats—such as ham, bacon and sausages—are bad for your health. Eating high amounts of these foods is associated with poor [heart health](#) and some forms of [cancer](#).

But the same can be true of many processed meat alternatives.

Plant-based alternatives designed to mimic meat, such as sausages and burgers, have become readily available in supermarkets, cafes and restaurants. These products are ultra-processed and can be high in salt and saturated fat.

Our study found when people replaced meat and dairy with ultra-processed meat alternatives—such as plant-based burgers or sausages—they ate more salt and less calcium, compared to eating meat or healthy plant-based options.

So if you're cutting down on meat for health reasons, it's important to think about what you're replacing it with. The [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#) recommend eggs, legumes/beans, tofu, nuts and seeds.

Tofu can be a great option. But we recommend flavoring plain tofu with herbs and spices yourself, as pre-marinated products are often ultra-processed and can be high in salt.

What about when dining out?

When you're making your own food, it's easier to adapt recipes or reduce the amount of meat. But when faced with a menu, it can be difficult to work out what is the best option.

Here are our four ways to make healthy choices when you eat out:

1. Fill half your plate with vegetables

When cutting down on meat, aim for half your plate to be vegetables. Try to also eat a variety of colors, such as leafy green spinach, red capsicum and pumpkin.

When you're out, this might look like choosing a vegetable-based entree, a stir-fry or ordering a side salad to have with your meal.

2. Avoid the deep fryer

The Australian Dietary Guidelines [recommend limiting](#) deep fried foods to once a week or less. When dining out, choose plant-based options that are sautéed, grilled, baked, steamed, boiled or poached—instead of those that are crumbed or battered before deep frying.

This could mean choosing vegetarian dumplings that are steamed not fried, or poached eggs at brunch instead of fried. Ordering a side of roast vegetables instead of hot chips is also a great option.

3. Pick wholegrains

Scan the menu for wholegrain options such as brown rice, wholemeal pizza or pasta, barley, quinoa or wholemeal burger buns. Not only are

they good sources of protein, but they also provide more [dietary fiber](#) than refined grains, which helps keep you fuller for longer.

4. If you do pick meat—choose less processed kinds

You may not always want, or be able, to make a vegetarian choice when eating out and with other people. If you do opt for meat, it's better to steer clear of processed options like bacon or sausages.

If sharing dishes with other people, you could try adding unprocessed plant-based options into the mix. For example, a curry with lentils or chickpeas, or a vegetable-based pizza instead of one with ham or salami. If that's not an option, try choosing meat that's a lean cut, such as chicken breast, or options which are grilled rather than fried.

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