

A rapid review of the evidence on the factors underpinning the consumption of meat and dairy among the general public

Research programme: Behaviour and perception

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Background

Willingness to reduce meat and dairy consumption across the population is relatively low (12.8%-25.5%), albeit increasing. While women and higher socio-economic groups tend to show greater awareness of an environmental rationale and subsequent willingness for change, this difference does not emerge strongly in studies reporting behavioural outcomes.

A broad set of search terms was used to identify literature in this area, but focused on:

- Evidence of the potential for behaviour change in response to sustainability, environmental and climate change agendas.
- The reduction of meat or dairy consumption, rather than stopping altogether. Motives and barriers to reduction rather than stopping could differ considerably.

Research was also specifically searched to explore the impact of socio-demographic characteristics on willingness to reduce meat and dairy consumption.

This study was used to inform the primary research on [Psychologies of Food Choice: Public views and experiences around meat and dairy consumption](#).

Results

Drivers for reducing consumption

- The strongest consumer motives for reducing meat and dairy consumption are to improve health and to benefit animal welfare.
- Health reasons are a weaker driver for reduction of dairy products than for meat, in part due to conflicting messaging regarding the necessity of dairy within a healthy diet.
- Only a small minority of consumers report a primary goal of protecting the environment in reducing their consumption of meat and dairy. This is due to both low consumer awareness of how, and how much, the production of meat and dairy impacts the environment, and the belief that other actions they could take are more important.
- While people recognise the benefits to society of reducing their meat and dairy consumption, they perceive this to be at a personal cost rather than benefit. People struggle to make a lasting change to their diet for solely altruistic motives in the face of perceived costs and sacrifices.

Barriers to reducing consumption

- Many more people express willingness to reduce their meat and dairy consumption than who go on to actually change their behaviour.
- Barriers to change include 'pull' factors towards meat and dairy, including taste, enjoyment, and seeing these foods as natural, necessary and normal parts of a balanced diet. People see few 'push' factors towards plant-based alternatives, and report barriers including low cooking confidence, fear of social rejection, and perceptions of inferior taste, price and freshness.
- Even among those accepting of one or more rationale to reduce meat and dairy in their diet, people's engagement in 'off-setting' activities can result in a switch of food types rather than overall reduction.

Interventions with potential to increase the reduction of meat and dairy consumption

Increasing motivation

- Target personal benefits (health, enjoyment, price) rather than societal benefits (environmental), as the former predominantly drive habitual food choices.
- Avoid identifying products as vegan (or vegetarian) to dissipate fears of social rejection.
- Reduce conflicting messaging to reduce, or help direct, offsetting.

Increasing opportunity

- Reduce cost and food literacy barriers to support lower socio-economic groups.
- Use nudging techniques to prompt positive dairy- and meat-free choices by default.
- Increase availability of meat and dairy alternatives to increase familiarity and create new social norms.

Increasing capability

- Build consumer confidence that people's individual action will lead to the desired result.
- Avoid information overload to maintain consumer engagement.

PDF

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