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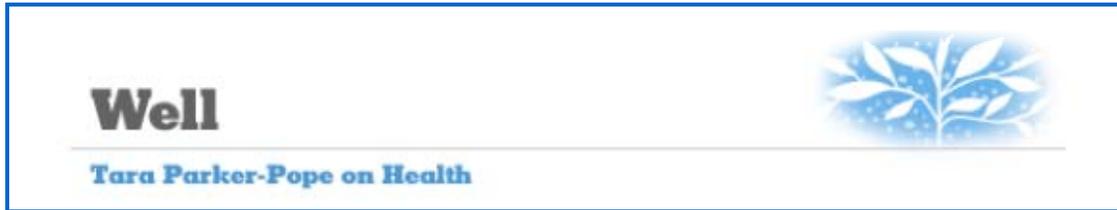
Monday, March 15, 2010

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March 11, 2010, 12:34 pm

Switching to Grass-Fed Beef

By [TARA PARKER-POPE](#)



Carla Gottgens/Bloomberg A

Murray Grey cow calls to a herd of beef cattle on a farm near Kyneton in rural Victoria, Australia.

What's the nutritional difference between beef from animals raised on grass compared with animals fattened in feedlots?

New research from California State University in Chico breaks it down, reviewing three decades of research comparing the nutritional profiles of grass-fed and grain-fed beef.

Over all, grass-fed beef comes out ahead, [according to the report in the latest Nutrition Journal](#). Beef from grass-fed animals has lower levels of unhealthy fats and higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids, which are better for cardiovascular health. Grass-fed beef also has lower levels of dietary cholesterol and offers more vitamins A and E as well as antioxidants. The study found that meat from animals raised

entirely on grass also had about twice the levels of conjugated linoleic acid, or CLA, isomers, which may have cancer fighting properties and lower the risk of diabetes and other health problems.

While the analysis is favorable to grass-fed beef, it's not clear whether the nutritional differences in the two types of meat have any meaningful impact on human health. For instance, the levels of healthful omega-3s are still far lower than those found in fatty fish like salmon. And as the study authors note, consumers of grain-fed beef can increase their levels of healthful CLAs by eating slightly fattier cuts.

Grass-fed beef has a distinctly different and "grassy" flavor compared with feed-lot beef and also costs more. [A recent comparison in The Village Voice](#) cooked up one-pound grass-fed and grain-fed steaks. The grass-fed meat tasted better, according to the article, but at \$26 a pound, also cost about three times more.

Today all cattle are typically raised on grass in the early months of their lives. But in the 1950s, cattle raisers hoping to cut costs and improve efficiency of beef production began to ship the animals to feed lots, where they could be fattened more quickly on inexpensive and high-calorie grains. Grain feeding also increased intramuscular fat in the animals. The result was a marbling effect that made meat more flavorful and tender but also raised fat and cholesterol levels.

Advocates of pasture-raised beef say the reasons to switch go beyond nutrition. The animal is raised in a more humane fashion that is also better for the environment. And 100-percent grass-fed animals typically aren't given hormones or antibiotics. The Web site [EatWild.com has more information about the environmental effects](#) of commercial farming and ranching practices and the benefits of pasture-raising.

The New York Times writer Marian Burros explored the taste difference in ["There's More to Like About Grass-Fed Beef."](#)

Labels on grass-fed beef can be misleading, and some meat carrying a "grass-fed" label was still "finished" on grains at a feed lot. Meats carrying a U.S. Department of Agriculture "process verified shield" adhere to specific standards for grass feeding, although Mother Earth News reports that a label from the American Grassfed Association is better. To learn more about labeling on grass-fed meat read the full Mother Earth article, ["The Label Says Grass-Fed, But Is It?"](#) or go to the [American Grassfed Association Web site](#).

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1. 1. March 11, 2010 12:58 pm [Link](#)

Great article! I'm a big fan of grass-fed beef and get mine locally in the Houston area. Watch Food Inc. or read The Omnivore's Dilemma and there's no turning back. Thanks again for the post!

— *Jenny Perot*

2. 2. March 11, 2010 12:59 pm [Link](#)

I feel like it is also important to note that grass-fed/free range beef is not without its own set of environmental issues. To be sure, a free-range cow is preferable to a CAFO cow. However, land management practices used by many ranchers and the BLM are not always sustainable, and contribute greatly to erosion, water pollution, and invasive species, particularly in the west. It becomes a matter of greater public concern when you consider the fact that many of these unsustainable practices are taking place on publicly owned land (again, most notably in the west, where the BLM has control over large parcels of land).

So if you're switching to grass-fed beef for environmental reasons, I applaud you, but urge you to still be aware of the source. There are ranchers out there who make a point to practice sustainable methods.

— *Emily*

3. 3. March 11, 2010 12:59 pm [Link](#)

Grass fed beef costs three times more. Seems to me that people can buy regular beef and then spend the difference on green leafy vegetables. That I bet would be far healthier overall for the same cost.

— *Fred Johnson*

4. 4. March 11, 2010 1:27 pm [Link](#)

The difference in taste is profound. It reminds me of what beef tasted like when I was a kid – which was in the 1960’s – so I’m guessing our almost-total conversion to “grain-fed” didn’t really happen until sometime after the 1950’s.

Although the fancy grass-fed steaks may cost \$12-20 a pound, grass fed chuck steak or ground beef seems to run around \$5 a pound in my neck of the woods, which seems quite affordable. Plus, since they actually grind it in-store and don’t get it from the processors, the hamburger never tastes like ammonia!

— *Nick*

5. 5. March 11, 2010 1:41 pm [Link](#)

There is also the issue that a lot of the bacterial contamination in beef can be attributed to the unnatural grain-only diet used in feedlots. In fact, I’ve heard it proposed that cows be switched back to a more normal diet for a week or so before slaughter as a way to reduce bacterial contamination.

— *David*

6. 6. March 11, 2010 1:53 pm [Link](#)

Out in Texas there’s no bad smell driving by grass-fed cattle ranches. You can smell a California feedlot several towns over if the wind is blowing the right direction.

— *Nic*

7. 7. March 11, 2010 1:57 pm [Link](#)

Cattle are meant to eat grass, and tons of it. Cows nor humans are meant to absorb tons of pesticides and hormones. We wonder why there’s such a high rate of cancer in our nation...

<http://foodfitnessfreshair.wordpress.com/>

— *FoodFitnessFreshair*

8. 8. March 11, 2010 1:59 pm [Link](#)

I live in an agricultural area of New South Wales, We get both grass as and grain fed beef at the same price. At a recent beef and beer night to raise money for charity, grain fed and grass fed beef cuts were served up side by side. The taste difference was obvious. Just about everyone at the charity auction thought the grass fed meat was tastier.

— *aussiereader4*

9. 9. March 11, 2010 1:59 pm [Link](#)

That is why I like going to Argentina and Uruguay for the best grass-fed beef (and great prices to match). Also, they are experts at preparing it.

— *Nevsky*

10. 10. March 11, 2010 2:00 pm [Link](#)

The epidemiological research on CLA is very weak. No good scientific data exists demonstrating the beneficial effects of CLA. Much of the initial research on CLA was funded by the meat/dairy industry because of their concern over the fact that saturated fats (a major component of animal food) has been shown to cause heart disease and cancer.

It's unfortunate that Tara Parker Pope accepts this theory as fact.

Land Animal based foods are still devoid of fiber, still contain cholesterol, and will never have the nutritional composition of plant foods such as avocado, olive, olive oil, nuts, seeds, peanut butter, etc.

Despite thousands of articles demonstrating the detrimental effects of meat and thousands of articles demonstrating the beneficial effects of fruits, vegetables, beans, etc., meat consumption has not decreased in the U.S.

We need to give up or reduce our addiction to beef the same way we are addicted to oil. Men need to stop viewing beef and meat products as essential to strength and muscle building. Women need to stop placing protein on a pedestal and realize that this excessive animal food consumption is causing ill health for their children and their spouses. Medicine, physicians, nurses, hospitals need to use plant food as one of the many tools medicine currently utilizes to combat disease.

— *Katie*

11. 11. March 11, 2010 2:00 pm [Link](#)

Ever been to El Paso? You can practically smell THOSE feedlots all the way to California!!

FROM TPP — I have been to El Paso. It's the dairy farms between El Paso and Albuquerque that ruin the desert air and the trip for me.

— JJ

12. 12. March 11, 2010 2:00 pm [Link](#)

What about corn-fed? Was that not included in the study?

FROM TPP — That's essentially the same thing as grain-fed or feedlot beef.

— Dave

13. 13. March 11, 2010 2:02 pm [Link](#)

The higher cost of grass-fed beef might also be good incentive for people to eat less of it, and to eat it less often, which in turn will reduce the environmental impact of its production.

— Heide

14. 14. March 11, 2010 2:06 pm [Link](#)

At the grassfed beef butcher in Kingston, NY the prices seem to be about twice that of grain fed, so I just eat half as much. You have to rethink how you prepare it, since its low fat content changes how it cooks. It's more local, more sanitary, more ecological, more healthy. I'm not sure how you could make an argument against it without going vegan.

Why not a link to the NY Times Magazine's article, "This Steer's Life" [or was it called, "Power Steer"] from 2002?

FROM TPP — Here it is. It was called "This Steer's Life" on the cover and "Power Steer" on the text. Good memory you have. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/31/magazine/power-steer.html?pagewanted=1>

— D. Newsome

15. 15. March 11, 2010 2:09 pm [Link](#)

Readers should be aware that prices vary wildly. I live in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. I happen to have several farmers who raise grain-fed beef and pork within a few miles of my home. I buy directly from the farmers. A steak like the one that cost \$26/lb in the Village Voice article would cost \$11 from my "neighbor."

I also pay \$4 – \$5 for ground beef and sausage from pastured animals. I pay a neighbor \$3 a dozen for eggs from chickens that wander around all day eating grass, seeds, and bugs like they should, not penned up in revolting chicken factories where they peck one another to death if given the chance.

I realize not everyone is lucky enough to have access to good local meat, but wanted to make the issue of cost differential clear.

In response to comment 3, grass fed beef IS “regular” beef. Beef from cows fed and fattened on corn in food lots (and slaughtered in disgusting conditions detailed in prior Times articles) is the unnatural alternative.

Of course we should be eating our leafy greens, but if you actually read this article you will see there are significant health advantages to eating grassfed meat over feedlot meat. Eating veggies won’t offset the damage that feedlot meat does to humans (and the environment.)

In addition, a common logic for going “natural” or “organic” in one’s diet is to work from the “top down.” That is, the risk of toxins/unhealthy additives increases exponentially the higher up the food chain you go. If your budget can only afford some changes, you get more bang for your buck by switching to natural/organic/free range/hormone free meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy, than by switching simply to organic produce.

That said, however, at this point there’s not enough grass fed meat to feed everyone, so if a lot of people ignore these facts and continue to stick with feedlot factory beef (and pork and poultry), that works well to keep the natural free-range supply available, and at reasonable cost, for me and my family.

— *Jen*

16. 16. March 11, 2010 2:10 pm [Link](#)

If it costs 3 times as much simply eat one thrid of what you were eating. That will certasinly add to your health. I have cut my overall meat intake by at least 75% and because grass fed beef is hard to come by where I shop, I have cut my beef consumption by almost 100%. I also have quit eating chicken because I can’t get pastured chickens. Not sure I would continue to eat much anyway because chickens are really dirty and will eat anything. Rabbit is a very clean and tasty herbivore,

— *sleeping in today*

17. 17. March 11, 2010 2:11 pm [Link](#)

1. How about cattle fed with corn, not grain?

There is more feed corn then human corn raised in the uppedr mid-west, I believe. One reason for feed corn is in the northern mid-west, one needs something to feed the cows when there is a foot of snow on the ground.

2. The use of human antibiotics in animal feed is a crime. It develops bacteria resistant to human antibiotics, which can be acquired by people eating the beef if the beef is undercooked. Make putting human antibiotics in animal feed a crime. Also ban the sale of meat from animals that ingested antibiotics in their feed.

3. If cattle were raised by the same people who raise wheat and corn, not by different individuals, the land could be cycled through crop growing cycles, beef feeding cycles. The cattle eat the plant waste, and land gets fertilized by animal waste, and there is no need for antibiotics in animal feed.

Why not encourage raising cattle on land that is cycled between crop raising and animals feeding on crop waste?

— *Tom*

18. 18. March 11, 2010 2:11 pm [Link](#)

If you have room, a chest freezer runs about \$150 for a medium size model. Eatwild.org lists farmers throughout the country that sell direct to consumers.

I have a connection (sorry- it needs to stay secret cause I don't want to share!) to a small dairy farmer who sells excess steers for \$2/ pound hanging weight. Added to that are butchering fees of about \$1/pound. There is some loss of bone and other excess, so the grass fed, dry aged beef in my freezer costs about \$4/pound. Split a whole animal among friends.

As for the health effect of fat- the lipid hypothesis is not well supported by data. Look up Gary Taubes' article for this newspaper, "what if it was all a big fat lie?" or his book "Good Calories Bad Calories" for a review of the literature.

— *Sean K*

19. 19. March 11, 2010 2:20 pm [Link](#)

Switching to beans....

99.5% of the beef in this country comes from large factory farms where the cows are kept in closed, confined areas which almost everyone agrees is inhumane. Even the beef at Whole Foods which is organic and humanely raised is corn/soy fed and NOT grass fed. 99.99999% of the cows/beef are not grass fed. Even the fanciest restaurants or most hip cafes are not purchasing grass fed beef.

It's important to note these statistics because even people who claim to care about these issues eat meat twice a day and the overwhelming majority of their meat is not grass fed or even organic grain fed. Never met a person who says they will only eat meat if it is grass fed, sustainable.

The primary nutrition problem in the U.S. is we eat too much beef/chicken/pig/lamb and not enough beans/whole grains/nuts/vegetables. Americans consume large amounts of cheese, butter, ice cream, cream cheese, milk, red meat, chicken, pork, bacon on a regular basis. Even if these foods are skim, low fat or 1%, it still is not healthy. The majority of our diets should be plant food; beans, peas, fruits, vegetables, beneficial fats (olives, nuts, seeds), and low salt, no trans fat, etc.

Lets see some articles about the excessive meat consumption and why Americans don't eat beans.

— *Katie*

20. 20. March 11, 2010 2:20 pm [Link](#)

We buy our pasture-raised beef from a local farm by the 1/4 cow and pay far less per pound for this high-quality, organic, grass-fed beef than we would buying the conventional grocery store beef. Buying in bulk is something to consider for those who find the cost of grassfed beef to be prohibitive. Even if you don't have the freezer space, you could divide it among friends.

— *Amber*

21. 21. March 11, 2010 2:22 pm [Link](#)

Kudos, commenter Katie (#10). Maybe this would not matter if we Americans simply followed the suggestions of our highly trained doctors and nutritionists to steer clear of red meat entirely and fill our daily diets with multi-colored veggies.

Grass vs. grain becomes a non-issue when we finally listen to common sense and beef up our vegetable intake. Six pounds of grain to create one pound of beef? Or how many acres of grass? Something doesn't add up here.

— *Chris*

22. 22. March 11, 2010 2:23 pm [Link](#)

Katie (comment 10)

Meat consumption has remained steady in the U.S., despite thousands of articles demonstrating the detrimental effects of meat and thousands of articles demonstrating the beneficial effects of fruits, vegetables, beans, etc., simply because meat tastes good.

When you can create something from tempeh, seitan, TVP or tofu that tastes anything like a well-marbled porterhouse steak, then I'm on the first bus to Veganland. Several dalliances with ovo-lacto-vegetarianism have helped me reduce my meat consumption to one portion a day, and I often have meatless days, but that self-discipline just means I enjoy the meat even more.

— *Mike*

23. 23. March 11, 2010 2:23 pm [Link](#)

The way to lower the cost of grass-fed beef is to locate a rancher or farmer who is selling direct to consumers and buy from them in bulk. Often you have to purchase a quarter-cow minimum amount (already butchered/ground and wrapped), which means either making room in your freezer (though its not as much volume as you might think) or going in with friends to split the order. If you take this approach, you can get grass-fed beef for roughly the price of comparable grainfed in the supermarket. Plus you know the person who is receiving your food \$\$\$. Options for buying pork, chicken, and mutton direct from farmers&ranchers are also increasingly available. I have simply sworn off factory/feedlot meat entirely, and buying in bulk, my wallet hasn't taken a hit.

— *JT*

24. 24. March 11, 2010 2:28 pm [Link](#)

Good grief, the cheap critters I eat probably noshed on leftover waffles frm IHOP or something.

— *Star*

25. 25. March 11, 2010 2:31 pm [Link](#)

\$26 a pound! We paid <\$3/# (for a side, so maybe we're paying the other \$23/# in the electric bill for our chest freezer...)

— *HW*

1 [2](#) [3](#) ... [5](#) [Next](#) »

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