

Briefing Sheet:

Pasture-raised Dairy and Meat Products are Good for You and the Environment



There's a lot more to food than taste, texture, smell and appearance. Its origins make a difference too. For instance, pick up any steak in a grocery store. There's a good chance that beef was fattened on a "factory farm." Typically, an integral part of these operations includes crowding animals into feedlots and feeding them diets rich in grains like corn and soybeans to speed the fattening process. Antibiotics and growth hormones are also mainstays of the factory farm production system. Producing meat and dairy products this way leads to environmental damage, poorer quality food, and ultimately, health consequences for people. The good news is that you have a choice. Pasture-raised meat and dairy products offer a healthier and environmentally friendly alternative to those raised on factory farms.

How are animals raised in pastures?

Pasture-raised cattle are given plenty of fresh air and sunshine, and get most of their feed from grasses or stored forage. The pastures are carefully managed to keep the grasses healthy and provide the animals proper nutrition while protecting the environment. Because pasture-raised animals do not live in crowded, highly-stressful conditions like their factory farm counterparts, they can be grown without growth hormones or antibiotics.

How are pasture-raised meats better for my health?

This growing area of research is revealing a broad range of health benefits from eating pasture-raised meats and dairy products. Here are some of the findings:

- Pasture-raised beef has less fat than beef fattened on grains.¹
- Pasture-raised beef fat has a healthier profile than that from grain-fed beef. Omega-3 fatty acids found in pasture-raised meats may help prevent heart disease, and contribute to healthy brain and nervous system functioning.^{2,3}
- Pasture-raised meats and dairy products don't need antibiotics to encourage growth or keep the animals alive. Feeding too many antibiotics to animals may contribute to the rise of "super bugs" — bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics.⁴
- Pasture-raised meat and dairy products have naturally occurring CLA (conjugated linoleic acid). This fatty acid may protect against heart disease and diabetes, prevent some types of cancer, improve immune functioning, help build lean body mass, and act as an antioxidant.^{5,6,7}
- Pasture-raised meats have more Vitamin E. This fat soluble vitamin is a potent antioxidant and may lower risk of heart disease and cancer.¹
- Pasture-raised cattle have lower amounts of a very dangerous strain of E. Coli.⁸

How is pasture-based farming good for the environment?

Research shows that converting fields from corn and soybean crops — ingredients found in typical factory farm feeds — to pastures has substantial environmental benefits.⁹ They can be:

- Soil erosion reduction of 50 to 80 percent.
- Pollutant run-off cut in half.
- Small to moderate flooding, resulting from farmland run-off, reduced by over 30 percent.
- Bird and wildlife habitats increased by five times.
- Greenhouse gasses reduced by up to 40 percent.

Questions to add to your next shopping list:

Did the animals have access to pastures on a regular basis throughout their lives?

yes no

Were antibiotics used to boost growth in the animals?

What is behind the claims on the label?

What can I do? How can I tell if meat is pasture-raised?

Vote with your dollar. The best way to find out how an animal was raised is to ask the farmer if it was raised on grass. This is easy when buying direct from a farmer or visiting a farmers' market. If you're at the grocery store, look carefully at the label. Look for phrases like "pasture-raised," especially in conjunction with "certified organic," or "Food Alliance Certified." Terms like "free range" do not give a complete picture, and the phrase "natural" says nothing about how the animal was raised. At restaurants, ask the server or manager if the meat is pasture-raised. If they don't know the answer, the meat probably came from a factory farm.

Tell your legislators, grocers, restaurateurs, and neighbors that you care about where your food comes from. Write them letters saying you want policies that encourage the production of meat and dairy products from animals raised on pastures. For more information about where your food comes from, and to find pasture-raised products near you, visit the FoodRoutes Network Web site, www.foodroutes.org.

Cedar Summit: A Case Study in Pasture Farming

Minnesota — In the early 1990s, Cedar Summit Farm started using rotational grazing (frequently moving cattle among small pastures) to produce milk. Now they also produce beef, pork, chickens, and turkeys on pastures without the use of antibiotics or hormones. Well-managed pasture farms like this keep contaminants out of the air and water, and the low operating costs of such a system allows the Minar family to make a good living. This farm is recognized by ecologists for its positive impacts on the environment. And consumers who are concerned about their health as well as the environment are now rewarding the Minars by buying meat and milk products straight from their farm.

References

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