

By [LAUREN PELLELY](#) Staff Reporter

## The war on meat: Is it harmful, healthy or both?

While meat gets a bad rap in the headlines, experts say the truth about its health impact is more complicated.



Recent studies have taken aim at the health drawbacks of meat, but local food experts say it can be part of a healthy diet - in moderation. (MARCUS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

Sugar, salt, saturated fat. They've all had their turn in the spotlight, with studies and media reports vilifying each one for chipping away at your lifespan or increasing your risk of one disease or another.

But the latest headlines point the finger at a different health enemy: Meat.

“Eating more animal protein increases risk of death, plant protein reduces it,” warned a [CBC story](#) in August, following the highly publicized release of a large U.S. study. “Meat in Modern Diet, Just as Bad as Sugar, Correlates with Worldwide Obesity,” [reads the headline of a research paper](#) published earlier this summer. And last year, the World Health Organization’s cancer agency [classified processed meat](#)— everything from ballpark hotdogs to greasy bacon — as a cancer-causing carcinogen, while declaring red meat — the mammalian muscle known as beef, veal, pork, lamb, mutton, and so on — as a probable carcinogen to humans.

“People want to blame something for their s----y health, and their s----y diet. Now it’s meat. Before it was sugar. Before it was carbohydrates. That’s just human nature,” says Abby Langer, a Toronto-based registered dietitian.

The Toronto Star: [https://www.thestar.com/life/health\\_wellness/2016/08/15/the-war-on-meat-is-it-harmful-healthy-or-both.html](https://www.thestar.com/life/health_wellness/2016/08/15/the-war-on-meat-is-it-harmful-healthy-or-both.html)

There is, it seems, a war on meat — but the reality is more nuanced than the headlines.

## Much ado about meat

Criticism of a meat-based diet often focuses on environmental and ethical arguments, with food researchers and friendly neighbourhood vegans alike highlighting everything from unnecessary cruelty to animals to the dire environmental impact of meat production.

A whopping 18 per cent of greenhouse gases are attributed to livestock production, notes bestselling food writer [Mark Bittman](#) in a memorable 2007 TED Talk. “How much livestock do you need to produce this? 70 per cent of the agricultural land on Earth, 30 per cent of the Earth’s land surface, is directly or indirectly devoted to raising the animals we’ll eat,” he says in the talk. “And this amount is predicted to double in the next 40 years or so.”

In recent years, however, the dialogue has shifted, focusing more narrowly on the personal health impacts of our steak-craving, burger-guzzling Western culture.

As Hillary Clinton trotted along the campaign trail earlier this year, her husband was doing the same — lauding not only his wife’s presidential ambitions, but also something else close to Bill’s heart: His nearly meat-free diet. Adopting a mostly vegan lifestyle amid his ongoing heart troubles “changed my life,” the [former president told the media](#) at a campaign pit-stop in Las Vegas in February.

With the exception of organic salmon once a week — at his doctor’s recommendation — Clinton has entirely ditched meat in recent years, touting the potential health benefits of his diet changes: Weight loss. Renewed energy. A longer lifespan.

He’s a politician, not a doctor, but Clinton’s view does line up with a growing body of evidence highlighting the risks of eating meat. The long-term consumption of red meat — and, in particular, processed meat — may result in an increased risk of death, cardiovascular disease, certain types of cancer and Type 2 diabetes, according to a [2015 review of epidemiological studies](#) written on behalf of Switzerland’s Federal Commission for Nutrition, which aligns with those striking WHO recommendations from the same year. In Canada, a diet high in processed meat is 7th on a ranking of the top dietary risks for death, while a diet high in red meat is 14th, [according to a 2015 report](#) from the Canadian Medical Association.

Though the news seems dire for meat-lovers, local food experts paint a more complicated picture of meat’s risks and benefits than headlines or statistics can convey.

## The nuanced reality

Meat isn’t “deadly,” says Dr. Tom Wolever, a professor of nutritional sciences at the University of Toronto and medical staff member at St. Michael’s Hospital. The bigger problem, he says, is portion sizes.

“Usually, you go to restaurants, and it’s a huge portion of meat and one slice of carrot and not much else,” Wolever says. “The portions need to be readjusted.”

You can have a healthy diet and still eat meat in moderation, echoes Laura Rosella, a Canada Research Chair in population health analytics and an assistant professor at the University of Toronto’s Dalla Lana School of Public Health.

“I think meat’s being vilified a little bit, and the messaging isn’t as nuanced as it should be,” she says, adding the backlash began about five years ago.

The Toronto Star: [https://www.thestar.com/life/health\\_wellness/2016/08/15/the-war-on-meat-is-it-harmful-healthy-or-both.html](https://www.thestar.com/life/health_wellness/2016/08/15/the-war-on-meat-is-it-harmful-healthy-or-both.html)

Despite the furor, meat's nutritional benefits can't be ignored. It's a valuable source of protein, vitamins A and B1, B12, niacin, iron, and zinc, notes Switzerland's 2015 review. It can also satiate hunger more so than other foods, Rosella says.

And there's also a striking difference between different types of meat, as highlighted by various studies, and experts say people need to avoid mentally lumping all meats together. "We know that hotdogs, for example, and cured meats may be associated with a higher risk of disease and mortality," says Langer. "Something like a lean steak is fine. Those are two different things."

So what's the take-away for modern eaters? Keeping in mind both the long-known health benefits of a primarily plant-based diet and the downsides of eating too much meat, it seems.

"I would recommend people to have a wide variety," says Dr. David Jenkins, a scientist with the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute at St. Michael's Hospital and a professor in the University of Toronto's departments of nutritional sciences and medicine. "Enjoy the cuisines of different cultures ... try out some of the vegetarian restaurants in Toronto."

People definitely need to eat more plants, Langer says, and should make an effort to experiment with alternative sources of protein, such as tofu and lentils.

"But there's nothing toxic or wrong with including meat in your diet a few times a week," she says.

## **The meaning behind meats**

### **Red meat**

Red meat is basically any type of mammalian muscle — so beef, lamb, pork, mutton, horse and goat. Most health experts preach moderation when it comes to eating things like steak, and red meat in general is classified as a probable carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the World Health Organization's cancer branch. But it's also a source of protein, iron, and vitamin B12, which helps keep red blood cells healthy.

### **White meat**

The lighter-coloured meat of poultry — think chicken and turkey — is typically touted as a healthier option than red or processed meat. The American Heart Association, for instance, encourages people to eat more chicken than red meat since it has less saturated fat. "Cholesterol and saturated fat can raise your blood cholesterol and make heart disease worse," the organization notes.

### **Processed meat**

Any meat that's been changed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or other methods to preserve or flavour is considered "processed" meat. Most of these products include pork or beef, but could also contain other types of meat or meat byproducts. Sure, it's yummy stuff — ranging from hotdogs to bacon to beef jerky — but experts warn against eating it every day over concerns about an increased risk of cancer.