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BRIGHT



Meat from ruminant animals that eat grass their entire lives offers unique health and ecological benefits. (Sander van der Werf/Shutterstock)

PREMIUM NUTRITION

A Cut Above: The Many Benefits of Grass-Fed Meat

Better nutrition, a cleaner environment, and soil health are fueling the growing demand for meat from pasture-raised animals

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When you buy beef, if you have visions of the meat coming from cattle that have grazed exclusively on pasture, like our great-grandparents had, it's time for a reality check.

Most cattle in the United States are fattened on grain and soy in confined conditions in feedlots or factory farms until they reach market weight. This practice, which has only occurred in the past 70 years or so, is stressful and damaging to animals' health, destroys healthy soil, pollutes the environment, and makes the animals' meat less nutritious.

There's a growing trend for people to want clean, health-promoting food and a back-to-nature approach for raising animals. As more people learn compelling nutritional, environmental, and agricultural reasons for choosing meat from animals raised exclusively on pasture, the demand for and sales of 100 percent grass-fed and grass-finished meat have risen.

In the United States, for example, retail sales of pasture-finished beef rose from \$17 million in 2012 to \$272 million in 2016. According to Technavio research published in 2020, the market for grass-fed beef is predicted to **grow by \$14.5 billion** between 2020 and 2024.

Nutritional and Health Benefits of Grass-Fed Meat

One of the key reasons for the increased demand for grass-fed, grass-finished meat is nutrition. Compared with feedlot meat, meat from 100 percent grass-fed beef, bison, sheep, lamb, and goats has less total fat and fewer calories, and has more vitamin E, beta carotene, and vitamin C.

With less fat and fewer calories, a six-ounce steak from a grass-finished steer can have 100 fewer calories than a six-ounce steak from a grain-fed steer.

Investigative journalist Jo Robinson, author of "Why Grassfed is Best!", estimates that if you eat a typical amount of beef, 66.5 pounds a year, switching to lean, grass-fed beef will save you 17,733 calories a year. If everything else in your diet remains the same, you'll lose about six pounds a year.

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PREVIEW

Even though grass-fed meat has less total fat, it has higher levels of health-promoting fats, including conjugated linoleic acid, or CLA, which is believed to have cancer-fighting and fat-burning properties. It also provides more omega-3 essential fats that have anti-inflammatory properties.

In 2011, the British Journal of Nutrition published [a study](#) that concluded that eating moderate amounts of grass-fed meat for only four weeks gives consumers healthier levels of these essential fats. The research showed that healthy volunteers who ate grass-fed meat increased their blood levels of omega-3 fatty acids and decreased their level of pro-inflammatory omega-6 fatty acids. No such effects were observed with grain-finished beef.

New research reveals that grass-fed meat also is higher in nutrients normally considered only found in plant foods such as fruits and vegetables.

In a [2021 review article](#) titled “Health-Promoting Phytonutrients Are Higher in Grass-Fed Meat and Milk,” the authors write: “While improved fatty acid ratios (omega-3: omega-6) and CLA have been the predominant focus in comparisons of pasture-raised, grass-fed vs. grain-fed meat and milk, emerging data indicate that when livestock are eating a diverse array of plants on pasture, many plant phytochemicals are also concentrated in their meat and milk. This is noteworthy as phytochemicals are often considered to occur only in plant foods.”

Phytochemicals are chemicals that may provide desirable health benefits beyond basic nutrition to reduce the risk of major chronic diseases. Phytochemicals found in higher amounts in meat from animals that eat a diverse array of plants on pasture include:

- Terpenoids, which are studied for their anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, anti-viral, and anti-carcinogenic properties;
- Phenols, which exert both antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects in both animals and humans;
- Carotenoids, whose intake is associated with many health benefits including improved cognitive function, reduced risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes, and protection from age-related macular degeneration;
- Tocopherols, with vitamin E activity, which also protect against most of the

same chronic diseases.

While these phytochemicals are much more abundant in plant foods, they can protect meat from protein and fat oxidation, which may improve protein digestibility and amino acid availability, and lower the formation of pro-inflammatory compounds generated by cooking.

The authors of the 2021 review also write: “Though research is sparse, several studies show a potential for anti-inflammatory effects and improved lipoprotein [i.e., cholesterol and triglycerides] profiles when people consume pasture-raised meat and dairy.”

Environmental Benefits of Grass-Fed Meat

Raising animals on pasture instead of on factory farms also benefits the environment in several important ways.

To begin with, a diet of grazed grass requires much less fossil fuel than a feedlot of dried corn and soy. The crops that are used to feed grain-fed animals are treated with fossil fuel-based fertilizers, sprayed with pesticides, and planted, tilled, and harvested with heavy equipment that all require fuel.

The harvested crops are then shipped to feed manufacturers to process them into feed. Then the feed is shipped to the waiting animals—all of which requires fuel. Animals that graze on pasture, however, do their own fertilizing and harvesting.

On factory farms, excrement builds up in the sheds and feedlots and releases foul smells that sicken the animals and farm workers.

Excess nitrogen and phosphorus from too much excrement pollutes the soil and groundwater and can drain off into streams and rivers.

By contrast, on well-managed pasture-based farms, the animals spread their manure evenly over the soil, where it becomes a natural source of organic fertilizer that improves the quality of the soil and the quality of the grass and other vegetation.

Improved Soil Health from Grass-Fed Animals

Managed grazing of ruminant animals on grass and allowing them to naturally fertilize the soil are key pieces of fixing what's broken in our modern agricultural

regenerate the soil are key pieces of fixing what's broken in our modern agricultural system that's destroying the health of our soil and contributing to weather extremes, the 2020 documentary "Kiss the Ground" explains.

Managed animal grazing builds organic matter in the soil, which leads to the soil retaining more water and increasing more carbon in the soil. Barren land with dirt that's lacking in important microorganisms then transforms into fertile land in which a diversity of vegetation grows.

In the film "Sacred Cow," regenerative farmer, lecturer, and author Joel Salatin says that all the deep soils on the planet developed under prairies because of herbivores such as ruminant animals. Consider that bison once freely roamed the plains in North America and helped sustain those ecosystems through grazing, fertilization, trampling, and other natural behavior. What the bison once did for the land can be closely duplicated by ranchers who raise ruminant animals on pasture in a managed way.

In a [2018 Journal of Animal Science article](#), researcher W.R. Teague writes that developing and implementing regenerative management protocols and practices that include ruminant grazing animals is necessary to ensure long-term sustainability and resilience of our agricultural system, especially with rapidly changing, uncertain, and variable weather.

What to Know About 'Grass-Fed' Labels

For consumers, trying to find 100 percent grass-fed and grass-finished meat from ruminant animals that have grazed in a managed way to regenerate soil health isn't easy because "grass-fed" on packages isn't regulated and can mean several different things.

The term can mean animals were fed grass pellets in a feedlot-type operation, or had grazed on just one type of grass instead of raised on pasture with access to different grasses and shrubs—the variety of which provides many of the outstanding nutritional benefits in grass-fed meat.

While the claim "grass-fed" can still be made through the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service actually discontinued verification of applicants' programs to its grass-fed standard in 2016.

Keep in mind that technically, all cattle are grass-fed at the beginning of their lives, but it's what type of feed they're finished on that makes the big difference in nutritional benefits.

Since the claim "grass-fed" can mean different things, what should you look for when you shop? If you want beef products from cattle that were never confined in feedlots, were 100 percent grass-fed and grass-finished, and weren't treated with hormones or antibiotics, look for the American Grassfed seal, advises Consumer Reports' Guide to Food Labels.

The American Grassfed Seal

The American Grassfed seal, which is overseen by the nonprofit American Grassfed Association, is found only on meat from ruminant meat animals, including beef, bison, goat, lamb, and sheep. The seal indicates that the producers met the following criteria:

- Animals are fed only grass and forage (no grain), from birth to harvest, on U.S. family farms.
- Farms are inspected every 15 months.
- The animals aren't given antibiotics or growth-promoting drugs, such as hormones.
- Farmers can't feed the animals crops with genetically modified organisms, and they can only use synthetic pesticides on the pasture as a last resort.
- Standards include some protections for animal welfare, such as providing animals with shade and shelter.

You can learn more at [AmericanGrassfed.org](https://www.americangrassfed.org).

Search for Local Regenerative Meat Producers

You can also search for local regenerative meat producers in your area. Talk to each local producer you find and ask if it supplements with grain or grain byproducts, if it uses antibiotics or hormones, and if it feeds its animals in confinement.

Or you can use the farm map database on [RegenerationInternational.org](https://www.regenerationinternational.org) and

Or you can use the farm map database on [REGENERATIONINTERNATIONAL.ORG](https://regenerationinternational.org) and type in your town or zip code to research the production processes of each different producer that comes up in your search.

The goal is to find a producer that sells meat from animals raised exclusively on pasture and preferably for the most nutrition, with access to an array of diverse, nutritious plant foods—the way nature intended.



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Melissa Diane Smith is a holistic nutrition counselor and journalist who has been writing about health topics for more than 25 years. She is the author of several nutrition books, including “Syndrome X,” “Going Against the Grain,” “Gluten Free Throughout the Year,” and “Going Against GMOs.”