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# Why Do People Think Cultured Meat Is Disgusting?

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# Why Do People Think Cultured Meat Is Disgusting?

Vegetarians and omnivores reject cultured meat for different reasons.

Posted February 7, 2022 | [Reviewed by Tyler Woods](#)

## KEY POINTS

- “Cultured meat” is real animal flesh grown from extracted muscle cells rather than slaughtered animals.
- While it is cruelty-free and environmentally friendly, many people find cultured meat too disgusting to eat.
- In a recent series of studies, vegetarians and meat-eaters were disgusted by cultured meat, but for different reasons.
- These results have implications for the successful marketing of cultured meat to different consumer groups.



Source: Photo by belchonock/123RF

A couple of years ago, I got into an argument with my vegan friend, Linda, over [cultured meat](#). While not yet commercially available, it is real animal flesh grown from extracted muscle cells rather than slaughtered animals.

Our conversation went like this:

Hal: *Linda, I'm really excited about the prospect of cultured meat. Think about it—steaks, lamb chops, and salmon filets created in chemical plants rather than taken from the dismembered corpses of dead animals. It's the ultimate cruelty-free meat.*

Linda: *Yuck. I hate the idea of meat grown in a petri dish.*

Hal: *But, Linda, widespread acceptance of cultured meat would save the lives of at least 70 billion animals a year. Meat produced in vitro from stem cells is the wave of the future. What's wrong with that?*

Linda: *Well, it's just... disgusting.*

## Is Cultured Meat Too Disgusting To Eat?

I was surprised by the level of Linda's gut-level revulsion of lab-grown meat. You would think that vegans and vegetarians would be enthusiastic about meat made from tissue cultures. After all, it does not involve the suffering of animals, it is free of pathogens, like salmonella, and does not contribute to global warming and the destruction of rainforests. But you would be wrong. In a [recent article](#) in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, UCLA psychologists Daniel Rosenfeld and Janet Tomiyama reported the results of three studies on differences in reactions to cultured meat among meat-eaters and vegetarians. Their research has important implications for efforts to increase the acceptance of a more humane and environmentally-friendly form of flesh by consumers.

### Study 1: Who Finds Cultured Meat Too Disgusting To Eat?

The first study was simple. The goal was to determine what proportion of meat-eaters and vegetarians find cultured meat too disgusting to eat. The participants were 200 omnivores and 200 vegetarians, recruited through a British-based online research subject pool. The subjects first read this brief description of cultured meat products: "*Cultured meat is grown from animal muscle cells in isolation without the need to raise animals. The world's first cultured meat hamburger was produced in 2013. Currently, cultured meat is not publically available, though it will likely become available in the near future.*"

The subjects were then asked if they agree or disagreed with the statement: "*Cultured meat is too disgusting for me to try eating it.*"



Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

The results were clear. A substantial portion of both vegetarians and meat-eaters were too grossed out by the idea of cultured meat to even give it a try. Indeed, However, refusal to try cultured meat was more common among vegetarians (55 percent) than omnivores (35 percent).

## **Study 2: Is Cultured Meat Too Much Like Real Meat? Or Not Enough Like Real Meat?**

Rosenfeld and Tomiyama thought that meat-eaters and vegetarians might have different reasons for eschewing meat derived from the cells, rather than the bodies, of cattle, chicken, and fish. They were interested in how two variables affected disgust toward cultured meat. The first was beliefs about the unnaturalness of cultured meat, and the second was the perception that cultured meat is similar to the flesh of real animals.

The researchers suspected that perceived unnaturalness would be the biggest driver of disgust for meat-eaters, whereas perceiving cultured meat as real animal flesh would be the biggest driver of disgust for vegetarians. To test this idea, they recruited 300 vegetarians and 300 meat-eaters. The subjects first read the description of cultured meat used in the first study. Then they completed three brief scales:

The *Perceived Unnaturalness Scale* consisted of three items to assess the degree to which the subjects thought cultured meat was unnatural. For example, “*Cultured meat seems artificial.*”

The *Animal Reminder Scale* was a five-item scale that measured the extent to which the subjects associated cultured meat with eating real animals. For example, “*Eating cultured meat would feel just like eating part of an animal's body.*”

The *Disgust Scale* was the same item used in the first study— “*Cultured meat is too disgusting for me to try eating it.*” But this time, the subjects rated their levels of disgust on a one (low) to seven (high) scale.

The results were surprising. Contrary to the researchers' expectations, the vegetarians and meat-eaters who had high scores on the unnaturalness scale felt greater disgust toward cultured meat. Indeed, the researchers concluded, “perceptions of unnaturalness strongly explained disgust across both dietary groups.”

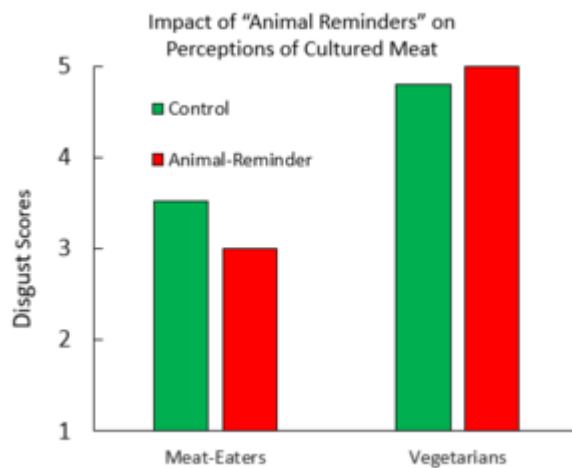
But as Rosenfeld and Tomiyama predicted, reminders that cultured meat is similar to the flesh of real animals had different effects on the meat-eaters and the vegetarians. Specifically, perceiving cultured meat as having animal origins (the animal reminder scale scores) was associated with more disgust among vegetarians but less disgust in the meat-eaters.

## **Study 3: Making Cultured Meat Less Disgusting?**

The results of Study 2 suggested that vegetarians and meat-eaters would respond differently to information on the animal origins of cultured meat. Specifically, Rosenfeld and Tomiyama hypothesized that vegetarians would become more disgusted by the idea of eating cultured meat if they read a passage that emphasized cultured meat is composed of animal flesh. They predicted that meat-eaters, on the other hand, would become less disgusted after they read the same passage.

For this experiment, they recruited 300 vegetarians and 300 meat-eaters. Half of the vegetarians and meat-eaters were in the control group and the other half were in the experimental group. The meat-eaters and the vegetarians in the control group read the same passage about cultured meat that was used in the first two studies. The subjects in the experimental group read a passage that linked cultured meat directly to living animals: "*Cultured meat is 100 percent pure animal flesh, so eating a hamburger made from cultured beef feels like eating something that comes directly from a cow. Every single bit of any cultured meat originates entirely from a living animal.*"

After they read the passages, the subjects completed the seven-point Disgust Scale.



Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

The researchers were right. Being reminded of the animal origins of cultured meat had opposite effects on vegetarians and meat-eaters. The vegetarians in the treatment group became more disgusted by the prospect of cultured meat. In contrast, the meat-eaters became less disgusted.

## Cultured Meat and The Animal-Reminder Paradox

The results of these studies suggest a paradox. Ad campaigns that [stress](#) the similarities between cultured meat and the flesh of real animals might increase the willingness of meat-eaters to give cultured meat a try, ultimately saving the lives of billions of animals. At the same time, animal-reminder-based [marketing](#) would probably decrease the appeal of cultured meat to vegetarians and vegans—most of whom eventually go back to eating animals. (See: [84% of Vegetarians and Vegans Go Back To Eating Meat.](#))

But, these results suggest that the celebrity chef David Chang was right when he claimed, "*It's not about changing the vegans and vegetarians. It's about changing the meat-eaters.*"

## References

Rosenfeld, D. L., & Tomiyama, A. J. (2022). Would you eat a burger made in a petri dish? Why people feel disgusted by cultured meat. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 101758.