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3-15-2019

Recent Research Shows How To Get People To Cut Back On Meat

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Recommended Citation

Herzog, Harold, "Recent Research Shows How To Get People To Cut Back On Meat" (2019). *'Animals and Us' Blog Posts*. 94.

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Recent Research Shows How To Get People To Cut Back On Meat

We could save millions of animals by eating one additional meatless meal a week.

Posted Mar 15, 2019

Breaking the meat habit is harder than, say, quitting [smoking](#). For example, between 1974 and 2014, the percentage of American adults who smoked dropped from 40% to fewer than 20%. In contrast, the proportion of Americans who eat animals has hovered between 96% and 98% for decades. In the United States, plant-based foods make up a rapidly growing \$3.7 billion dollar a year industry. Yet, at 222 pounds of animal flesh per person, Americans set [a record for meat consumption](#) in 2018. Remarkably, half of self-identified vegetarians actually eat meat every day. And 86% of vegetarians and 70% of vegans eventually return to eating animals. (See [Why Most Vegetarians and Vegan Return To Meat](#).)

There are, however, alternatives to full-on vegetarianism or veganism which are the absolutist approaches to reducing farm animal suffering. People on [flexitarian diets](#), for example, are vegetarians most of the time with occasional exceptions. And animal activists such as Brian Kateman advocate [reducetarianism](#). They want to nudge large numbers of people to make small changes in their diets. The math behind this strategy is impressive. Here's how Hillary Rettig lays out [the utilitarian calculus](#):

If everyone in the U.S. reduced their meat consumption by just the modest target of one meal per week—around 5%—that would save around 450 million cows and other animals each year in the U.S. alone. To achieve the same result, the abolitionists would have to convert approximately 4.5 million meat eaters to complete veganism.

But what is the most effective strategy to motivate people to cut back on meat? A research team headed by Dr. Catherine Amiot of the University of Quebec in Montreal recently took this question on. Published in the [journal PLoS One](#), their results support the flexitarian and reducetarian approaches to saving animals.

The Study

The research was a randomized control trial in which the participants were randomly assigned to an intervention group and a control group. The study was an improvement on previous attempts to experimentally reduce meat-eating because it lasted a full month, and daily meat consumption was precisely measured. The participants were men between the ages of 18 and 30 years old who were omnivores. On average, they ate about 10.5 portions of meat a week. (Only men were recruited in the study because women typically eat less meat, and for statistical reasons, the research team wanted to reduce variation in the sample).

The study had three stages.

Stage 1: Baseline. In the first stage, the researchers gathered basic demographic and food consumption data on all the men. The subjects were given diaries to record their food intake at every meal and scales to weigh the meat they consumed. They were then divided randomly into the intervention and control groups.

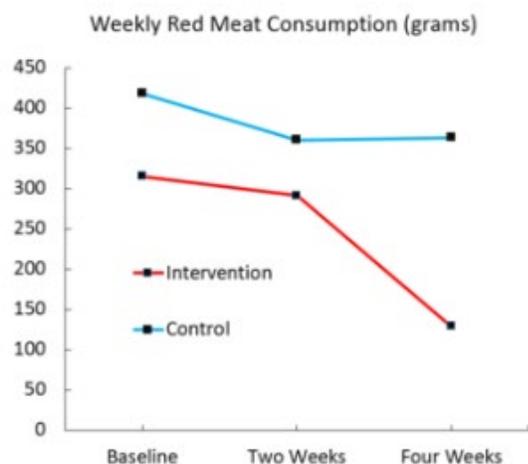
Stage II: The Intervention. A week later, the men in the meat reduction (intervention) group returned to the lab for the first part of the intervention. Each of them participated in a one-on-one information session that consisted of five elements designed to motivate reduced meat consumption.

- *Social norms* – The men watched a Power Point presentation which [stressed](#) the degree to which Canadians have cut back eating meat over the last four decades.
- *Health/Environment/Animal Suffering* – The participants were then given information on the negative impact that meat consumption has on human health, [the environment](#), and animal welfare.
- *Appeals to Fear* – The participants watched two graphic videos produced by an animal rights group (PETA) on the horrors of factory farms.
- *Attribution of Animal Minds* - For this component, the subjects were shown a photograph of a cow and asked to write a paragraph about the animal's inner experiences, thoughts, and emotions.
- *Self-efficacy and goal setting.* At the end of the session, the men were given specific tips for preparing meat-free meals and choosing meatless meals in restaurants. They were also asked to set a specific meat-reduction goal in terms for the next month, for example, consuming 1 to 3 portions of meat per week.

The second part of the intervention lasted for the following two weeks. During this time, each participant received a daily text at about 5 PM (just before dinner time). It reminded them of the benefits of lower meat consumption and it offered tips for cooking meat-less recipes.

Stage III: The Finale. Two weeks after the last text was sent, all the men returned to the lab. They turned in their food diaries and completed questionnaires designed to assess their attitudes and feelings about meat-eating and which aspects of the intervention they thought was most effective in changing their eating habits.

The Results....



Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

The intervention was successful. This was particularly true of reductions in the consumption of red meat. Over the course of the month-long study, the consumption of red meat in the intervention group dropped by an impressive 55% compared to a decrease of only 6% in the control group.

They also reported that:

- It took several weeks for the intervention to have an effect. As you can see in the graph, nearly all of the changes occurred in the last two weeks of the study.
 - The drop in meat consumption in the last two weeks occurred despite the fact that the participants were no longer receiving text reminders before dinner.
 - Surprisingly, the men tended to reduce their meat-eating more during the weekends than on weekdays when they were more likely to be working or going to classes. The reasons for this finding are unclear.
- Nine of the 16 participants in the intervention group met the meat reduction goal they set at the beginning of the study.
 - By the end of the study, a third of the men in the intervention group had shifted their dietary identification from “omnivore” to “flexitarian.”

- The subjects ranked the informational components of the intervention as being the most effective in motivating them to eat less meat. The PETA video came in second. None of the men reported that writing about what it would be like to be a cow had any impact on their behavior.

Reducing Meat Consumption To Save Animals

This research was well-done, and I would love to see these results replicated with a larger sample which included women as well as men. These results support the view that a highly effective way to reduce animal suffering is to convince large numbers of people to make relatively small changes in their behavior. For more on the reducetarian movement, see Brian Kateman's book, [The Reducetarian Solution: How the Surprisingly Simple Act of Reducing the Amount of Meat in Your Diet Can Transform Your Health and the Planet](#).

References

Amiot, C. E., Boutros, G. E. H., Sukhanova, K., & Karelis, A. D. (2018). Testing a novel multicomponent intervention to reduce meat consumption in young men. *PloS one*, 13(10), e0204590.