

It was reported this month that meat consumption in the UK [has decreased by 17% over the past decade](#), and even [Prince Charles has urged](#) people to stop eating meat and dairy products on certain days of the week. Although still considered a contentious subject by policymakers and the public, there is [strong scientific consensus](#) that high meat consumption is extremely harmful to us and the environment. What could be seen as welcome news should really be taken as a call to action for decisive policymaking that prioritises the health of British citizens and the planet.

Despite the headlines, British diets are as bad as ever. The [new data](#) on self-reported intake suggests that, on average, every citizen consumes one serving of meat every day of the week, including four servings of red and processed meat. Meaningful policy support is required to make healthy and sustainable diets accessible, affordable and appealing for all of the British population.

The foods we consume are a [major driver](#) of global heating, contributing similar amounts of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere as the UK energy system. Meat and dairy are responsible for more than [three-quarters](#) of this impact. Without meaningful reductions in meat and dairy intake, there is [little chance](#) of meeting emissions reduction targets, both at national and international levels. It has been estimated that if everybody ate like a Briton, we would be a massive [three times](#) over the food-related target for avoiding dangerous levels of climate breakdown. If we eat above our means, others will have to change their diets even more to rein in climate breakdown. Rather than contributing its fair share, the UK is outsourcing its responsibility for reducing food-related emissions to other countries.

The public health case for reducing meat consumption is similarly strong – tens of thousands of avoidable deaths from cardiovascular diseases and cancers have been [linked](#) to red and processed meat consumption in the UK. Yet, despite this public and environmental health emergency, policymakers appear unwilling to take meaningful steps that would help create a healthier, more sustainable food system. Recommended targets and policies continue to fall behind the scientific evidence and, as they stand, are woefully inadequate.

From a health perspective, the [Eatwell Guide](#) developed by Public Health England recommends that individuals who consume more than 90g of red or processed meat a day reduce their intake to 70g. Self-reported intake stands at [51g a day](#) so one might assume there is nothing to worry about but, as ever, the devil is in the detail. It is well known that participants in dietary surveys underreport their true food intake, often to such a degree – estimates range from [28-33%](#) for the UK – that one would expect an obese participant to be seriously underweight. And national statistics in how much red meat was [supplied](#) to the population, paired with how much of it was wasted, even suggest that consumption could be two-thirds higher (83g) than what survey participants report.

The actual recommendation of the Eatwell Guide is even more misleading. Its target value of 70g a day would mean having a serving of red and processed meat five times a week would be totally fine, much in contrast to the current scientific understanding. A comprehensive [review](#) of the scientific literature on healthy eating suggested limiting red and processed meat intake to below one serving a week (14g a day), five times below the current recommendation. Updating national dietary guidelines

to reflect the latest scientific evidence would therefore be a critical first step for reducing the 30,000 annual deaths associated with red and processed meat consumption in the UK.

From a climate crisis perspective, the Climate Change Committee – the body tasked with monitoring and providing advice on greenhouse gas emissions – recommends a [20% reduction](#) in the consumption of beef, lamb, and dairy in support of the government’s target of achieving net zero emissions by 2050. Such ambition would be well within reach, without requiring any policy intervention, if the current trends towards lower meat consumption continued. However, the committee’s own report admits that this level of reduction might be too low, and an [independent scientific analysis](#) suggested that beef, lamb and pork intake would have to decline by 89%, poultry intake by 66% and dairy intake by 61% for the UK’s food emissions to be in line with limiting global heating to under 2C.

Decisive policies will be required to support dietary improvements at such a scale. One key policy is to provide the right incentives to consumers, for example by making sure food prices accurately reflect a food’s health and environmental harm. Accounting for the full costs of foods would particularly increase the costs of meat in reflection of its high impact on health and the environment. Current estimates for the UK suggest meat would cost at least 36-56% more if [climate breakdown costs](#) were included, and red and processed meat would be up to 79% more expensive if [health costs](#) were included. These price changes would encourage consumers to switch to healthier and more environmentally friendly protein sources such as beans, lentils and nuts. Because those are generally cheaper, there would be financial [savings](#) too. And the revenues from this policy could be used for providing additional support for helping low-income households improve their diets.

Agriculture and food trade are two other areas where health and environmental concerns have long been ignored. The UK’s agricultural subsidy scheme contains little support for farmers to grow healthy and environmentally friendly produce. In addition, Brexit and new trade agreements with large meat-exporting countries such as the US and Australia are [expected](#) to lead to increased meat consumption and poorer diets. To avoid such a situation, it will require reforms to agriculture and trade policies, for example by limiting agricultural support and free-trade agreements to healthy and climate-friendly foods.

Consistently and explicitly integrating health and environmental concerns into all policies will be essential for safeguarding our health and the health of the planet. For politicians, that should mean less talking about their insufficient achievements, and getting on with policymaking that is truly in the public interest.

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Source: [Enough chewing the fat, UK politicians: we must stop eating so much red meat | Marco Springmann](#)