

# Briefing

## Flexitarianism: the environmentally friendly diet

### Summary

Most people are by now familiar with the concept of vegetarians, people who don't eat meat or fish. They will also recognise vegans, people who don't eat any animal products, and maybe pescitarians, people who don't eat meat, but do eat fish.

There is a new dietary choice that has been gaining awareness and acceptance alongside these: flexitarianism. Known by a few other names (flexible vegetarian, demitarian, semi vegetarian, part-time carnivore etc.) a flexitarian has a mainly plant based diet, but eats small amounts of, probably higher standard, meat, fish and dairy.

### On the rise

The flexitarian diet is becoming an increasingly popular choice. The global trend is showing an increase in meat eating, but in certain parts of the world, like the UK, meat consumption has declined. The average amount of meat and dairy consumed each week in the UK as dropped from 1160g per person in 1980, to 989g in 2012<sup>i</sup>. This declining trend is due to a number of reasons: health benefits of lower meat diets, the higher cost of meat and dairy, food scares such as the horsemeat scandal and the environment impact of livestock production. It looks like this trend might continue: a recent YouGov survey conducted for Eating Better found that 25 per cent of the British Public had cut back on meat in the past year, and that 34 per cent would consider eating less meat in the future<sup>ii</sup>.

Flexitarianism is being predicated as the next big foodie trend. You can find the newly accepted word in the Oxford English Dictionary (and also on sites like Urban Dictionary), excellent blogs (like <http://theflexitarian.co.uk/>) and hundreds of flexitarian cook books to choose from. Celebrity chefs like Yotam Ottolenghi regularly includes meat-free and low meat dishes on his menus and in his columns, and Michel Roux Junior has been talking about the need to reduce our meat consumption on programmes like BBC Food and Drink. Restaurants such as The Grain Store and River Cottage are promoting sustainable diets, with a wide range of meat-free and low meat dishes on the menu.

For more than 40 years Friends of the Earth has seen that the wellbeing of people and planet go hand in hand – and it's been the inspiration for our campaigns. Together with thousands of people like you we've secured safer food and water, defended wildlife and natural habitats, championed the move to clean energy and acted to keep our climate stable. Be a Friend of the Earth – see things differently.

## What's the gain?

A flexitarian diet for all, as well as benefiting our health, is necessary to enable us to feed the growing global population within planetary boundaries. There will be an estimated extra 2 billion people globally by 2050, meaning the food system will need to feed over 9 billion people. The UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) estimates that this will require overall food production to increase by about 70% by 2050, with an extra 200 million tonnes of meat produced to meet the growing demand<sup>iii</sup>. Yet this assumes significant increases in meat consumption whilst more affluent countries maintain current levels.

By switching to flexitarian diets in high meat eating regions like the UK we can ease the pressure on the global food systems, and feed more people without destroying the environment.

## So what does being a flexitarian mean? Practically?

It's a personal choice, but having a flexitarian diet could mean:

- Meat and dairy free before 6pm
- Meat free during the week : only eating meat at the weekends
- Using meat as a flavour, not the base of the meal
- Only eating meat dishes 3 times a week

It is really up to you and your tastes and preferences, but they all have one thing in common. They involve cutting down how much meat, dairy and fish we eat.

## Why go flexitarian?

### 1. Livestock and climate change

Our agricultural systems are one of the biggest emitters of greenhouse gasses, with livestock production accounting for 14.5 per cent – 21 per cent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions according to the FAO<sup>iv</sup>. These emissions come from a wide range of sources, the largest of which (45 per cent of the total emissions) is attributed to growing the feed for livestock. Producing just 1 kilogram of soyabeans (a common component of animal feed) releases 7.7 kilograms of GHG<sup>v</sup>. Other sources include deforestation for farming land (9 per cent), emissions from the animals themselves (39 per cent), and manure decomposition (10 per cent)<sup>vi</sup>.

Switching to a lower meat diet, reducing intake from over 100g per day to less than 50g per day can cut GHG by nearly half<sup>vii</sup>. A reduction in our meat and dairy consumption has been identified by the IPCC as a significant step we can all take to reduce our GHG emissions<sup>viii</sup>, and will be a necessary if we want global temperatures to stay below 2°C of warming<sup>ix</sup>.

### 2. Livestock and land use

Land is a finite resource, with a large number of demands competing for space, like food production, housing, biofuels and nature. Our ability to feed the global population comes into direct conflict with these demands, especially our ecosystems and the demand for biofuels. Land for livestock and the production of animal feed is a key driver of deforestation. In Brazil alone, 62.2 per cent of deforested land is used for pasture for cattle<sup>x</sup>, and the Chaco region in South America, 63 hectares of forest is cleared every hour, meaning an area over 10 times the size of Hyde Park in London is destroyed each day.

The amount of land used in livestock production is already huge, eating up 75 per cent of all current agricultural land use<sup>xi</sup>, a third of which is used to grow animal feed<sup>xii</sup>. Cutting out

animal products entirely, and using the agricultural land already in use to feed humans directly, could enable us to feed an extra 4 billion people<sup>xiii</sup>. Reducing the amount of animal products we consume can allow us to expand the cultivation of crops of human consumption, without leading to increased deforestation and land use change.

A flexitarian diet would also reduce the pressure on our scarce fresh water supplies. Over extraction and climate change have severely depleted the global reserves of fresh water, so much so that a third of the world does not have enough water. Agriculture consumes 70 per cent of the global fresh water supply, a third of this is on livestock production<sup>xiv</sup>. It takes 15,455 litres of water to produce 1 kilogram of beef, compared to 255 litres for a kilogram of potatoes<sup>xv</sup>.

### 3. Livestock and health

Meat is a good source of protein, iron and other nutrients that are essential to a balanced and healthy diet. However, there is an established link between overconsumption of meat and a long list of health problems, like an increased risk of heart disease, strokes and obesity<sup>xvi</sup>. Excessive consumption of meat has also been linked to an increased risk of cancer. Research by Friends of the Earth suggests that a low meat diet could prevent over 45,000 premature deaths, and save the NHS over £1.2 billion per year<sup>xvii</sup>.

It is not just about the amount that we eat either. Processed meats are much higher in salt, sugar and fat, as well as having less protein per kilogram<sup>xviii</sup>. Excessive consumption of red meat has also been linked to an increased risk of cancer. The Department of Health guidelines state that people should only eat 70g of red and processed meat a day<sup>xix</sup>, a figure back by the World Cancer Research Fund. Eating less, and better, meat is good for our health.

Alongside the effects that overconsumption of meat can have on individual health, the widespread use of antibiotics in farming is contributing to a growing threat to global health. Large volumes of antibiotics are used in farming, but not just for treating sick animals. They are administered as a preventative measure to stop the rapid spread of disease in intensely farmed livestock. The unregulated overuse of antibiotics in farming around the globe is exacerbating the problem of antibiotic resistant bacteria<sup>xx</sup>, and is a key source of antibiotic resistance in common bacteria, such as salmonella<sup>xxi</sup>. This is hurting our ability to fight diseases we thought we had treatments for, and the World Health Organisation warns that we are heading for a "post-antibiotic era - in which common infections and minor injuries can kill"<sup>xxii</sup>.

### 4. Fish

The technology supporting fishing has become more and more sophisticated, with fleets using sonar to pinpoint the exact location of fish shoals they use methods such as pair trawling, with nets that can fit 10 Boeing jumbo jets<sup>xxiii</sup> or bottom trawling, that drag along the floor and completely destroy sea bed habitats to catch huge numbers of fish. This has led to the collapse of fish stocks, with the FAO classing over 70 per cent of the world's fish stocks as 'fully exploited', 'over exploited' or 'depleted'<sup>xxiv</sup>. This is not only a tragedy for our marine ecosystems, but also for the many people around the world who rely on small scale fishing for food and employment.

### **So why not cut it out entirely and go vegetarian?**

Not all meat and dairy consumption and production is environmentally damaging. Intensive livestock production, with its huge environmental footprint and dependence on oil-based

fertilisers, chemicals and imported feeds, is not compatible with a low-carbon future. However, not all farming methods are the same: farming in smaller quantities, letting livestock graze instead of housing them intensively in sheds and feeding them imported crops can all reduce the environmental impact of meat and dairy production.

Livestock farming has an important role to in many people's lives around the world. It provides livelihoods for around 1 billion of the world's poorest people, as well as being a vital part of many people's diets.

### **Part of a sustainable diet**

While flexitarianism can have a significant positive impact on our health and the planet, it should form part of a wider sustainable diet. Alongside eating less meat, it includes:

- Eating more plant based foods
- Eating better meat
- Wasting less food
- Eating more fresh food and less processed food
- Sourcing from known suppliers that have good standards

Adopting a sustainable diet is one way for individuals to tackle catastrophic climate change and the environmental damage caused by our current diets. Friends of the Earth is also calling for action at a local, national and global level to support sustainable diets, from advocating change to international agricultural standards, to getting the UK government to commit to promoting sustainable diets through guidelines and procurement standards.

### **Some useful resources**

Let's Eat Better Pledge: <http://www.foe.co.uk/page/eat-smart-pledge>

Eat Smart Action Pack: <http://bit.ly/eatsmartpack>

Meat Atlas: <http://bit.ly/1AttLeH>

Healthy Planet Eating: <http://bit.ly/Healthyplaneteating>

Eating Better: <http://www.eating-better.org/>

### **References**

---

<sup>i</sup> DEFRA (2013) UK – household purchases

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/286493/UKHHcons-04mar14.xls](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/286493/UKHHcons-04mar14.xls)

<sup>ii</sup> Eating Better (2013) Public attitudes & behaviours research [http://www.eating-better.org/uploads/Documents/Briefing\\_Eating\\_Better\\_YouGov\\_survey.doc](http://www.eating-better.org/uploads/Documents/Briefing_Eating_Better_YouGov_survey.doc)

<sup>iii</sup> FAO (2009) How to Feed the World in 2050

<sup>iv</sup> FAO Key facts and findings last accessed 28/7/14

<http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/>

<sup>v</sup> FAO (2013) Tackling climate change through livestock

<sup>vi</sup> FAO (2013) Tackling climate change through livestock

<sup>vii</sup> Scarborough et al, 'Dietary greenhouse gas emissions of meat-eaters, fish-eaters, vegetarians and vegans in the UK' 2014 <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10584-014-1169-1>

<sup>viii</sup> IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change, Chapter 11: Agriculture, Forestry and other land use (AFOLU)

<sup>ix</sup> F. Hedenus et al. (2014) The importance of reduced meat and dairy consumption for meeting stringent climate change targets

<sup>x</sup> Friends of the Earth Europe (2014) Meat Atlas

<sup>xi</sup> JA. Foley et al. (2011) Solutions for a cultivated planet

<sup>xii</sup> Friends of the Earth Europe (2014) Meat Atlas

<sup>xiii</sup> E. Cassidy, P. West, J. Gerber and J. Foley (2013) Redefining agricultural yields: from tonnes to people nourished per hectare

- xiv Friends of the Earth Europe (2014) Meat Atlas
- xv Waterfootprint.org (last accessed 24/7/14)
- xvi Friends of the Earth (2010) Healthy planet eating: How lower meat diets can save lives and the planet
- xvii Friends of the Earth (2010) Healthy planet eating: How lower meat diets can save lives and the planet
- xviii Friends of the Earth (2010) Healthy planet eating: How lower meat diets can save lives and the planet
- xix NHS Livewell <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/meat.aspx> (last accessed 18/7/14)
- xx <http://www.who.int/world-health-day/2011/en/> (last accessed 24/7/14)
- xxi Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics (2014) Antimicrobial resistance - why the irresponsible use of antibiotics in agriculture must stop
- xxii World Health Organisation (2014) Antimicrobial Resistance: Global Report on Surveillance
- xxiii <http://britishseafishing.co.uk/commercial-fishing-methods/> (last accessed 28/7/14)
- xxiv FAO (2012) General situation of world fish stocks  
<http://www.fao.org/newsroom/common/ecg/1000505/en/stocks.pdf>