

How much meat do we eat - the reality check

We continue to hear the message 'reduce red meat for health'. Apparently, there is the perception Canadians are eating too much meat. However, if you look at Statistics Canada data, this is a misnomer.

In actual fact, most Canadians consume a quantity of red meat that is moderate, with fresh red meat accounting for just 14% of our weekly meals. So based on a serving of 100 grams of meat, out of the 21 meals available in a week, only 3 of them are fresh red meat (pork, beef, veal or lamb). It is important to note that only a fraction of this is beef.



Here is a look at the numbers from the Statistics Canada perspective.

The Canadian Community Health Surveys, conducted in 2004 and 2015 using 24-hour dietary recalls, found red meat (fresh and processed) declined 14 grams from 75 grams to 61 grams. On average, Canadians are consuming red and processed meats within moderate and reasonable amounts.

Average Grams per Day CCHS 2004 vs 2015

	2004	2015
Fresh red meat ¹	53.5	41.1
Processed red meat ²	21.9	19.9
TOTAL	75.4	61.0

2015 Meat Intake Relative to Food Guide

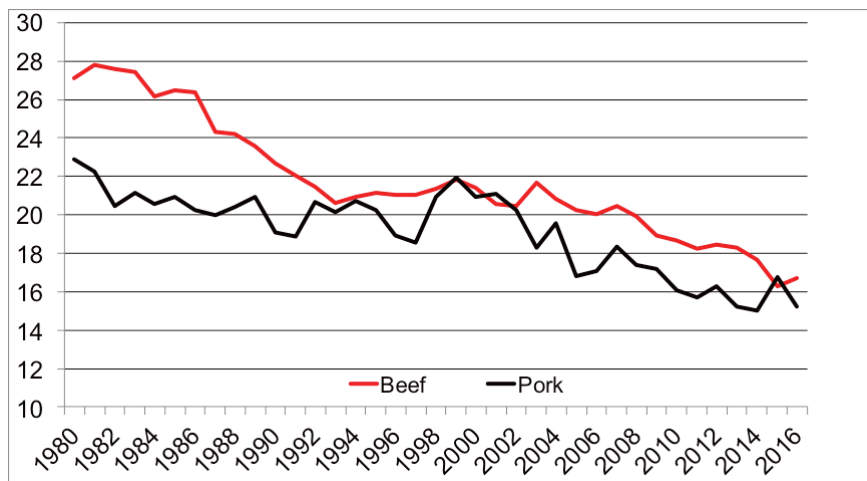
Food Serving Guide	Number of Food Guide servings (2015)
75 grams	Just more than half
75 grams	1/4 serving
	Less than 1

¹ includes beef, veal, pork and lamb including ground meat and burgers

² includes salted beef, bacon (but not turkey or chicken bacon), ham, sausages (not turkey or meatless), and luncheon meats (not considered poultry)

This decline in meat consumption is validated by Statistics Canada's disappearance data where the net supply is divided by the Canadian population.

Statistics Canada Canadian Meat Disappearance 1980 - 2016



So, what would be the harm if Canadians further reduced their red meat intake as touted in the popular press? It could certainly exasperate an already concerning situation of inadequate intakes of essential nutrients; especially for women.

According to Health Canada's Evidence Review for Dietary Guidance, a significant number of women - 48% of women 31-50 years of age and 69% of females older than 70 years of age - are already consuming less than the recommended number of servings for meat and alternatives. Incidentally, so are 56% of adolescent males.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the same report noted some Canadians – especially women and older adults – have inadequate intakes of iron, zinc, and vitamin B12. Iron and zinc are available in red meat in the form that the body can most easily absorb and vitamin B12 is found only in foods of animal origin. Of concern, is that further reductions in red meat consumption by these population groups may lead to deficiencies affecting mental health, energy levels, and infant birth weight. Certainly some Canadians would benefit from eating more meat.

The real public health concern should be the astonishing consumption of ultra-processed foods.

New research commissioned by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada shows that ultra-processed food consumption in Canada continues to increase and is alarmingly high, accounting for almost half of our daily calorie intake. This includes fast food, sugary drinks, snacks, chips, candies, cookies, sweetened milk products, sweetened cereals, and sauce and dressings. Ultra-processed foods provided 48% of the total daily energy intake whereas fresh and processed red meats contributed only 8% of total energy intake, with fresh red meat representing just 5% of our calories.

For most people, balance needs to come from swapping refined grains and empty calories for whole grains and vegetables; not reducing meat.

Many Canadians, especially women and older adults, are not eating too much red meat. The rallying cry should be to reduce consumption of ultra-processed foods.

References:

Apparent disappearance data, Statistics Canada

Canadian Community Health Surveys (Nutrition) 2004 and 2015, Statistics Canada

Evidence Review for Dietary Guidance Technical Report, 2015, Health Canada

Ultra-processed foods in Canada: consumption, impact on diet quality and policy implications, December 2017, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada

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