

The burger apocalypse: low carbon eating and avoiding food waste

By Tony Curran

28 Nov 2017

href="https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/594361/NDNS_Y1_to_4_UK_report_full_text_revised_February_2017.pdf">More than 95% of people still eat meat and don't like being told that it is wrong and bad for the planet to do so. But it is now well established that [meat production](#) is responsible for a substantial proportion of human greenhouse gas emissions, not to mention issues around animal welfare. Perhaps more worrying is the increasing problem of massive food wastage. However, people can significantly address these challenges - and an impending "burger apocalypse" - by following a few simple steps toward low carbon eating.



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Switching to a low carbon diet has three major benefits: it reduces your impact on the environment, it [saves you money](#), and it's very likely to be [healthier for you](#). So what's all this talk of a burger apocalypse, then? The fact is the now common choice to "grab a burger" is a significant part of human-caused climate change. Food accounts for [up to 30%](#) of greenhouse gas emissions and – gram for gram – beef is the highest carbon food.

Mass producing beef comes with all sorts of unintended consequences. Animal welfare is a long running issue and there have been numerous [cases of cruelty](#) uncovered over the years. Excessive red meat [contributes to disease](#) and obesity, and the huge amount of land needed for cattle [farming](#) could be used much more efficiently to produce other foods.

As a result, the whole planet suffers. For cows, like lambs, produce methane – a greenhouse gas 34 times as potent as CO₂. Cows need huge amounts more water than other foods and are the leading cause of deforestation, reducing how much CO₂ can be absorbed instead of going into the atmosphere. The [World Resources Institute](#) says that compared to 2006, global demand for beef is projected to increase by 95% by 2050.

Government and business have to play their part, but rather than absolving themselves of responsibility by laying blame on others, individuals can make simple changes to their diet and cut tonnes off their annual carbon footprint.

Avoid waste

People are quick to blame the supermarkets for food waste, but in developed countries [much more is wasted in the home](#) than along the whole of the supply chain. The amount of food we throw away is so staggeringly high the numbers become meaningless to most people. You could think of it this way: [28% of our agricultural land](#) and a big proportion of our precious fresh water is used to grow food that never reaches a human stomach. The best way to reduce your food waste is to plan your meals before going to the supermarket, so you only buy what you will use.

Buy in-season, low carbon food

People get preoccupied with whether food is local. But whether it's in-season is more important for it's carbon footprint. In his book [How Bad Are Bananas?](#), Mike Berners-Lee tells us bananas bought in the UK are low carbon as they come from central or South America by boat. Conversely, you might get UK-grown strawberries in the winter, but they'll be grown in a hot-house, using fossil-fuel energy, so they could be responsible for 12 times the amount of carbon than between May to September when they're in season.

With global trade and supermarkets selling most foods year-round it can be hard to know when fruits and vegetables are in-season. You can check this [seasonality chart](#) before making the trip to the supermarket. Note on the chart, asparagus, when bought outside the UK's short growing season of April to June, is responsible for is around 30 times higher carbon as it has to be air-freighted from Peru.

Even people who don't want to reduce how much meat they eat can switch from beef or lamb to pork or chicken and cut around two-thirds off the associated carbon footprint. Vegetarians need to be careful here too. Cheddar cheese is high carbon so maybe have small portions and consider soft cheeses, which need a lot less milk.

Low carbon meat substitutes in supermarkets have exploded in the last couple of years and restaurants are catching up, with most now providing at least one or two meat-free options. [The Impossible Burger](#), which launched in the US last year after five years of research, is aimed at meat lovers. Yet it's a plant-based burger. The "magic ingredient" is heme, which is what makes meat "meaty". But you can get it from plants as well as animals. It has an eighth the greenhouse gas emissions as a beef burger but it smells, sizzles, and, apparently, tastes like beef.

Meat-eaters and burger lovers are trying it and giving it [positive reviews](#). It might just persuade people to switch. How something tastes is a bigger factor for the average person than the ethical or environmental argument.

Another way to reduce your food's impact on you and the earth is to eat less – especially protein. As the [World Resources Institute](#) points out, people now consume far more than the recommended 50 grams of protein a day, especially in wealthy countries. This excess protein is often the expensive, unhealthy, high carbon kind. An astounding [2.2 billion people](#) – almost one in three – are now overweight or obese.

So how can you do your bit to fight The Burger Apocalypse? By following the ABC of low carbon eating: Avoid wasting food, Buy in-season food, and Choose low carbon food more.

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