

Consumer reactions, popular fancies, and scientific facts related to the healthfulness of meat products

Christine M. Bruhn¹

Center for Consumer Research, University of California, Davis 95616-8598

Abstract

This article is an overview of consumer attitudes toward the healthfulness of meat products. Although food choice is made based on the pleasure of eating, health is also an important factor. Despite advice that all foods can fit into a healthful diet, many people believe that some foods are good and others bad. Although meat offers important nutrients, about one-third of consumers say they are eating less meat to make their diet more healthful. Special interest groups claim that people consume an unhealthily excessive amount of meat; however, Americans on average consume 135 g of meat and meat alternatives, less than the 142 to 198 g per day recommended by the USDA food pyramid. Issues other than taste and nutrition can affect consumers' acceptance of meat products. Concern about the use of antibiotics and hormones has decreased in recent years, but it could be ignited by concern about antibiotic-resistant pathogenic bacteria. New information on the healthfulness of animal products could change public perception, especially if the beneficial attributes are perceived as natural and health claims are not exaggerated.

Key Words: Consumer Attitudes, Meat, Food Safety, Health, Hormones, Antibiotics

Introduction

An increasing number of consumers are aware of the importance of diet to overall health. Up to 90% recognize that diet is one of the factors that affects heart disease, and 60% see diet as a protective factor against the development of some types of cancer (Parkwood Research Corporation, 1995, 1996; Harnack et al., 1998). Appealing taste, however, is acknowledged as the primary force in food selection (Abt Associates Inc., 1997; Glanz et al., 1998). This article relates beliefs about diet and health to meat products. Specifically addressed will be the role of meat products in the diet, the attitude toward the use of animal drugs and hormones, and consumer receptivity to special health-enhancing properties in animal products.

The Role of Meat in the Diet

Consumers have indicated they will pay more for healthier foods, but their perception of what is healthier may differ from that of health professionals (Parkwood Research Corporation, 1995, 1996). Although most professionals have indicated repeatedly that all foods can fit into a healthy diet, advocates and self-styled nutritionists have frequently indicated otherwise. Consumers have responded to the views of the latter group; 70 to 75% agree that there are good and bad foods (American Dietetic Association, 1997). Furthermore, 46% believed they should never eat some foods. Even though people have said they like to hear about new nutrition studies, 48% complained that they hear what not to eat rather than what they should eat, and 27% said they were confused about dietary advice. These findings suggest there is room for nutrition education. Consumers are seeking reinforcement

of actions that comply with dietary guidelines, and they want to hear positive dietary advice.

Consumers' primary nutritional concern is dietary fat (Abt Associates Inc., 1997). The percentage of those identifying the fat content of food as a nutritional concern was 27% in 1988, peaked at 65% in 1995, and then decreased to 56% in 1997. Concern about cholesterol peaked in 1990 at 44% and then gradually decreased to 20% in 1997. Salt content of food was a concern of relatively few people, only 23% of those surveyed in 1997. Other nutritional issues were mentioned by 10% or fewer consumers.

People are making dietary changes; however, the extent of change is not as great as attitude studies indicate. When asked what they were doing to ensure their diet is healthful, consumers said they were eating more fruits and vegetables. Those volunteering this response went from 57% in 1990 to 78% in 1997 (Opinion Research, 1993, 1995; Abt Associates Inc., 1997). During this same time period, those saying they ate less red meat remained at about 35%. Those identifying fats and oils as an area of change increased from 27% in 1990 to 42% in 1996 and then decreased to 35% in 1997.

Should consumers consume less meat? The USDA Food Guide Pyramid indicates the recommended number of servings people should consume daily from each food group. The diet should be based on grains and cereals, with 6 to 11 servings recommended. Guidelines for other food groups included two to four servings of fruit, three to five servings of vegetables, two to three servings of dairy products, and two to three servings of meat. Sugar, salt, and fat should be used in moderation. The recommended two to three servings from the meat group is the equivalent of 142 to 198 g of cooked lean meat, poultry, or fish. One egg, 118 g of tofu, 30 g of peanut butter, 79 g of nuts, and 59 g of seeds are the equivalent of 28 g of cooked lean meat. Dietary records indicated

that average consumption across all Americans was consistent with this recommendation at 135 g, based on the 1994 continuing survey of food intakes (Cleveland et al., 1997). Individual differences in meat group consumption were substantial. Although 52% of men met their meat group recommendation, only 25% of women met the recommendation. Meat itself was responsible for less than half of the lean meat equivalent servings among both men and women. Therefore, a blanket statement that all people should eat less meat is not consistent with dietary advice and consumption behavior.

People do not seem to recognize the positive contributions animal products make to the diet. The American Dietetic Association (1997) asked consumers about the health impact of various foods and food groups. Over 90% believed that fruits and vegetables have a very healthful effect. Dried beans were considered very healthful by 62% of consumers. Fish was perceived as very healthful by 57% and poultry by 55%, but meat such as beef, pork, and lamb was seen as very healthful by only 13%; an additional 45% considered it somewhat healthful. This information indicates a need to address the positive nutritional contributions of meat products, especially iron, zinc, and conjugated linoleic acid. Although people choose food for taste, they need to be aware of the nutritional contributions the food provides.

Attitudes Toward Animal Production Practices

Some animal production practices generate concern about the safety of consuming the animal product, environmental impact of animal production, or animal welfare issues. Use of antibiotics or hormones has not been a high consumer concern. When asked to volunteer areas of food safety concern, only 1% of consumers in a national survey indicated that antibiotics and hormones were a source of concern to them (Abt Associates Inc., 1997). When those questioned were specifically asked about their response to antibiotics and hormones used in poultry or livestock production, 43% in 1997 classified them as a serious health risk, a decrease from 61% in 1989. More consumers express concern about products containing germs or harmful bacterial than any other food safety area. When asked to voluntarily identify areas of concern, in 1997 over 60% mentioned bacteria-related issues (Abt Associates Inc., 1997). When asked to respond to the potential health impact of bacteria or germs, 82% considered this area a serious risk. For comparison, pesticide residues were considered a serious risk by 66% of consumers, and 28% considered nitrites in food a serious risk. The potential for antibiotic use in animals to develop resistance in pathogenic bacteria may increase consumer concern in this area.

Consumers are also sensitive to animal treatment issues. Although animals are grown for the meat and other products they produce, people who are not familiar with animal products may think of them as distant pets. They may object to the thought that an animal would be treated as impartially as a production factory. People could also be concerned if animal holding facilities do not reflect the highest quality of care and cleanliness. People may be distressed if animals were subjected to an unpleasant medical procedure that could be

avoided if proper management was practiced. Animal care workers should be sensitive to animals' well-being and follow procedures consistent with safety.

Response to animal care issues has been reflected in the marketplace. In 1995, 41% of consumers indicated they refused to buy products due to ethical treatment of animals (Opinion Research, 1995). Animal activists have also been effective in the voter's booth. In 1998, California voters passed a referendum that prohibited the transport or sale of horses destined for human consumption. Horses may still be sold for pet food.

Consumer Receptivity to Special Health-Enhancing Properties of Animal Products

The potential for health-enhancing products is substantial. Health professionals indicated the greatest support for products with overall nutritional value, rather than benefits from an individual component (Schmidt et al., 1997). Consumers indicated preference for natural sources of functional ingredients. Consumers also expressed a desire for positive information. They want to hear what they can eat, rather than what to avoid. Younger consumers expressed a preference for short-term, energy-boosting nutritional components, whereas older consumers were most interested in long-term benefits, such as increased protection from cancer. Benefits that appeal to older consumers are likely to encounter a market segment that is growing. Currently, 26% of the U.S. population is 50 yr or older, but by the year 2050 this category will increase to 36% (Food Institute, 1996). By 2005, 20% of the population will be 65 yr or older, with 18 million people over 85 yr.

Enhanced nutritional components in animal products meet the expectations of health professionals and consumers. Animal products having an overall positive nutritional profile, boosting a specific component, such as conjugated linoleic acid, could provide additional protection against some cancers. The message could be positive, telling people what to eat rather than what not to eat, and people will be encouraged to consume a product whose flavor they enjoy.

Consumers are more likely to believe a message if it is endorsed by credible sources (Schmidt et al., 1997). Characteristics that increase trust include perception as a knowledgeable expert, concern about public welfare, truthfulness, and a good track record (Frewer et al., 1998). Consumers are less likely to believe people who exaggerate, distort information, or are believed to have a vested interest. A health message should emphasize consumer benefits, provide information on safety and quality, and indicate where additional information can be obtained.

Implications

Consumers have recognized the value of eating healthful foods; however, appealing taste is paramount in food selection. People are receptive to food with added health benefits, as long as the food is safe and produced in a humane and environmentally sound manner. Communication is the key to

correct consumer myths and to increase awareness of new information or enhanced properties of healthful foods.

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Notes

1. Correspondence: phone: 530-752-2774; fax: 530-752-3975; E-mail: cmbruhn@ucdavis.edu.