

A Healthy Discussion about Saturated Fat: A Perspective on Beef & Healthful Dietary Patterns

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The definition of a healthy diet is changing. Nutrition experts, educators and authors are pushing the conversation about the unintended consequences of long-standing dietary advice and the resulting challenge Americans face in following current dietary guidance

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Summary

The Landscape Defining a Healthful Diet is Changing

The definition of a healthy diet is changing. Nutrition experts, educators and authors are pushing the conversation about the unintended consequences of long-standing dietary advice and the resulting challenge Americans face in following current dietary guidance. From plant-based and gluten-free diets to the Mediterranean lifestyle and Paleo approach, there's a wide range of eating patterns being debated by the public health community – and varying amounts of scientific evidence to support these recommended diets.

Background

A new book by Nina Teicholz, *The Big Fat Surprise: Why Butter, Meat and Cheese Belong in a Healthy Diet*, is the latest contribution to this national dialogue, with a specific emphasis on the association between saturated fat and cardiovascular disease. As the book points out, there have been a growing number of research studies and commentaries by scientists in peer-reviewed journals reevaluating the role of saturated fat in heart disease risk, including concerns about the unintended consequences of a low-fat diet. In fact, a recent review of more than 70 clinical studies indicates that there may not be enough evidence to conclude that a diet rich in polyunsaturated fats (from fish, nuts, seeds and plant-based oils), but low in saturated fats, actually reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease.

But while this new book focuses on saturated fat's role in health, the debate is much broader, focusing on the consequences stemming from a population-based approach to a "healthful diet" based on today's food supply and environment, compared to a more personalized set of recommendations that recognizes individual needs and goals. In addition, for many years, research has illustrated that an emphasis on individual nutrients, such as fat, may not support health – and in fact, could have the opposite effect. For example, at a time when Americans were eliminating saturated fat in their diet, they may have inadvertently been consuming more calories from foods that did not deliver important nutrients such as refined grains like white bread, regular white pasta, pastries and non-nutrient dense snack foods. This reinforces the need for further research to understand the role and combination of all nutrients in a healthful diet.

The current national dialogue on healthy diets is a welcome and important part of the process that triggers more nutrition research and education to ultimately improve our health and wellbeing. The Beef Checkoff, on behalf of America's farmers and ranchers, remains committed to contributing to the dialogue by sharing scientific research and conducting education efforts.

Discussion

The Evolution of the Saturated Fat Discussion

Beef has been in the cross hairs of the saturated fat conversation. An important milestone in that discussion has been *The Big Fat Surprise*, especially given the interest it has received.

Over time, saturated fat intake has been increasingly linked to beef consumption, but the reality is that 10 percent or less of saturated fat and total fat in the American diet comes from beef. And, about half of the fatty acids in beef are heart-healthy monounsaturated fat. There's clearly an opportunity and need to set the record straight on the evidence surrounding beef and saturated fat. To address this need, among other efforts, the Beef Checkoff has supported more than 35 studies since the 1980s to determine the association between saturated fat, beef intake and heart health, and the entire beef community has worked from "gate to plate" to provide a significantly leaner variety of steaks, roasts and ground beef.

One piece of recent, breakthrough evidence is the "Beef in An Optimal Lean Diet" (BOLD) research, which showed that, contrary to conventional wisdom, a heart-healthy diet and lifestyle that includes lean beef, even daily, can improve cholesterol levels and reduce blood pressure. The BOLD research was a significant milestone in understanding the role of beef in heart disease because it incorporated lean beef into a dietary pattern consistent with the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) approach, which is well-recognized for supporting heart health and primarily emphasizes plant proteins. Importantly, the improvements in heart-health risk factors seen from the BOLD diets were as effective as those from DASH.

In addition, while this book is gaining attention now, the dialogue about the unintended consequences of a low-fat diet is not necessarily new. Initiated, in part, from the perspectives that were widely promoted by experts such as Dr. Robert Atkins and other medical and scientific advocates of low- carbohydrate, high-fat diets, the science community has conducted rigorous research to test the effect of various diet approaches on weight management and overall health for the past several years. This work continues to demonstrate the complexity of the issue and the need to more thoroughly understand the ideal ratio of all macronutrients in the diet for health and the unique impact of that ratio on different individuals.

Beyond Fat: Exploring the Role of All Nutrients for Health

As the research in this area has evolved, the attention on saturated fat – and particularly its impact on heart health – has sparked a deeper look into the role of the other macronutrients in health: carbohydrates and protein. In particular, the ratio or combination of carbohydrate, fats and protein in the diet is a hot topic in nutrition research.

One of the realities of this type of research is the attention it draws to the impact of how macronutrients are selected and replaced in a daily diet, to meet total energy needs. For example, low- carbohydrate diets are usually higher in fat, while low-fat diets are often higher in carbohydrates. Interestingly, protein is the one macronutrient that has remained at a consistent level of intake in both approaches: low-carbohydrate and low-fat. In this respect, until fairly recently, the role of protein was an underappreciated piece of this dietary puzzle.

In response to questions raised by nutrition researchers who are examining these questions, the beef checkoff has supported substantial nutrition science and education to elevate the need for more protein research to explore the benefits of high-quality protein in health and wellness. A significant body of research supported by the Beef Checkoff and others has demonstrated the role of high-quality protein, like beef, in helping to maintain a healthy weight, sustain weight loss and keep a favorable body composition over time.

For instance, it's well-documented that moderate-protein diets combined with exercise are an effective way to sustain weight loss and enhance body composition, by decreasing body fat and preserving lean mass. Checkoff-supported research has demonstrated that increasing the proportion of high-quality protein (like the protein in beef) to carbohydrates in the diet may have positive effects on body

composition, as well as blood lipids, glucose control and satiety during weight loss. In addition, research shows eating a protein-rich meal or snack can help you feel full longer. These benefits are examples of the type of mounting evidence that demonstrates the significance of protein – and the optimal mix of protein, carbohydrates and fat – in promoting health.

The Beef Checkoff's Role in Contributing to an Evidence-Based Dialogue

At a time when more than one-third of Americans are obese, and half of the U.S. population is expected to be diagnosed as diabetic or pre-diabetic by 2020, there is an urgent need to reexamine the evidence and define the optimal diet for individual health. Americans are increasingly struggling with how to follow current dietary guidance, and evidence indicates that a population-based (or "one-sized-fits-all") approach to dietary recommendations has not always resulted in American's improved health. As a result, recommendations that get "back to basics" and define the optimal mix of carbohydrate, fat and protein for personal health and wellness are emerging.

In the context of this dialogue, it's important to focus recommendations on the scientific evidence while recognizing the complexity of the optimal diet for human health. Several studies throughout the last few years have pointed out the unintended consequences of eliminating or emphasizing one nutrient or food in the diet, including animal products like beef. Long-standing scientific evidence and current dietary guidance continue to reinforce the role of the total diet and an overall balanced approach, including high-quality protein like beef, whole grains, low-fat dairy, fruits and vegetables, to support a healthy lifestyle. As the scientific community defines food choices and patterns for health, evidence continues to demonstrate beef's role as a high-quality, nutrient-dense protein that sustains, satisfies and offers versatility for health, including heart health.

Conclusion

Americans deserve realistic, actionable support to build healthier diets that can be maintained over the long term. While we all crave balance, we want healthier diets we can enjoy. Beef offers a unique range of choices that contribute to a variety of personal dietary patterns and deliver an experience that both satisfies and delivers a delicious nutrient-dense package. The Beef Checkoff continues to engage and contribute to this national dialogue by providing a variety of wholesome, high-quality beef choices that support health and wellness goals; advancing scientific research to better understand how the beef eating experience contributes to health; and supporting educational forums and resources to translate and apply published science to Americans' lives.

Additional Resources

- [The BOLD Study: Beef in an Optimal Lean Diet](#)

Tags: [Beef Issues Quarterly](#), [Summer 2014](#), [Trends Analyses](#)