

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 misstatement.

In actual fact, most Canadians consume a quantity of red meat that is well within Canada’s Food Guide recommendations. As a refresher, the Food Guide advises teen girls and adult women have 2 servings of meat and alternatives a day, whereas it is 3 servings a day for males. A serving of fresh meat is 75 grams.

Let’s look at the data from Statistics Canada surveys to get a handle on how much red meat Canadians actually eat.

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 the amounts recommended in Canada’s Food Guide.

Average Grams per Day CCHS 2004 vs 2015 2015 Meat Intake Relative to Food Guide

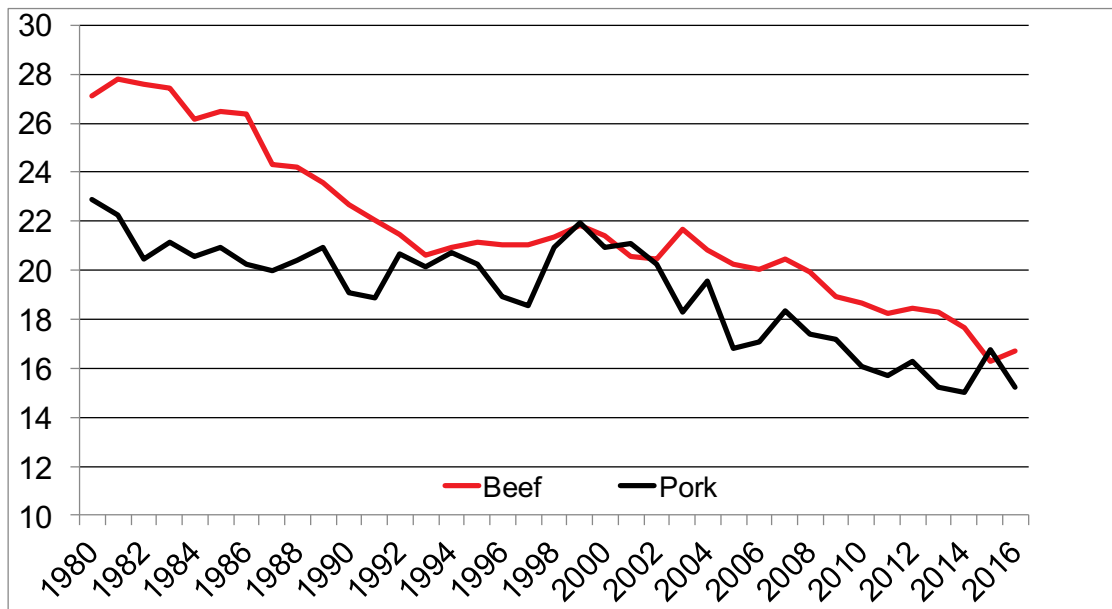
	2004	2015		Food Guide serving	Number of Food Guide servings (2015)
Fresh red meat ¹	53.5	41.1		75 grams	Just more than half
Processed red meat ²	21.9	19.9		60 grams	1/3 serving
TOTAL	75.4	61.0			Less than 1

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.

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

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References:

Apparent disappearance data, Statistics Canada

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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