

Social media messages help reduce meat consumption

December 9 2020



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Sending direct messages on social media informing people of the negative health and environmental impacts of consuming meat has proven successful at changing eating habits, a new study from Cardiff

University has shown.

The study showed that sending direct messages twice a day through Facebook Messenger led to a significant reduction in the amount of red and processed meat the participants consumed over a 14-day period.

Participants reported, on average, eating between 7 and 8 portions of red or processed meat during the previous week before the Facebook messages were sent, which then dropped to between 4 and 5 portions during the second week of the [intervention](#) and stayed at roughly the same level one month after the intervention.

Furthermore, the intervention led to an observed 'behavioural spillover' effect in which the participants indicated a desire to also reduce other types of meat they would consume in the future, alongside dairy products.

The study has been published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

The [health impacts](#) of eating too much red and processed meat are well established, with links to cardiovascular disease, stroke, and certain forms of cancer.

Meat is also a major driver of [climate](#) change, responsible for approximately 15% of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, with a growing consensus among scientists that reducing excess meat consumption will be necessary to meet climate change targets.

Yet, evidence suggests there is a lack of public awareness of the issue and that people tend to greatly underestimate the extent to which meat consumption leads to climate change.

"With Christmas approaching, it is a good time to consider how much

meat we consume on a day-to-day basis and the impacts that this can have on the environment as well as our health," said Emily Wolstenholme from the School of Psychology, who led the study.

"Our study shows that making people aware of these climate impacts makes them think about their eating habits. It also shows that people are willing to make changes to help the climate."

A total of 320 participants were recruited for the study, who were then divided into either one of three experimental conditions, or the [control group](#), and were sent messages through Facebook Messenger twice a day during the two-week intervention period.

Different messages were sent to participants in the experimental groups, each focussing on the environmental and/or health consequences of eating too much meat, for example: "If you eat only a small amount of red and processed meat, you will protect the environment by reducing the release of harmful greenhouse gases."

Participants were asked to complete a food diary every day during the two-week period to keep track of their diet.

Surveys were sent to participants at the end of the two-week intervention to measure their red and processed meat consumption, as well as other environmentally friendly behaviors. The same survey was repeated a month after the end of the intervention.

Over the two-week period the researchers observed a significant reduction in the amount of red and processed [meat](#) that was consumed by the participants receiving health messages, environmental messages and combined [health](#) and environmental messages—with no significant difference between each of these approaches.

Professor Wouter Poortinga, co-author of the study from the Welsh School of Architecture, said: "The results of the research are really encouraging. It shows that we can make changes to our diet, and if we all do, it can make a big difference for climate change"

More information: Emily Wolstenholme et al. Two Birds, One Stone: The Effectiveness of Health and Environmental Messages to Reduce Meat Consumption and Encourage Pro-environmental Behavioral Spillover, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.577111](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.577111)

Provided by Cardiff University

Citation: Social media messages help reduce meat consumption (2020, December 9) retrieved 4 March 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-social-media-messages-meat-consumption.html>

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