

U.S. consumer health perceptions of plant-based meat: Summary of recent research

Americans are looking for healthy and protein-rich foods, and many are conflicted about the healthfulness of conventional meat. Many struggle with inconsistent information about which foods are healthy. Most Americans view plant-based meat as healthy, and health is a top reason cited for trying and repurchasing plant-based meat. Many say they would eat more plant-based meat if it were less processed, but health appears to be less of a barrier than taste is to trial and repeat purchase today.

All figures pertain to U.S. consumers unless otherwise noted.

Health and nutrition (especially protein) are primary reasons why people say they choose foods in general.

- One poll shows health as consumers' #1 stated reason for overall food choices, with 79% saying health is "very" or "somewhat" important. High protein is #2, with 67% saying it is "very" or "somewhat" important. They rated these as more important than: being natural (65%), sustainable (57%), and 5 others tested. (Poll by Morning Consult on behalf of GFI, 2024)
- Another poll shows health as consumers' #2 stated reason for overall food purchasing and consumption at 62%, after taste (87%); consumers' top criteria for "healthy" are "fresh" (40%), "low sugar" (37%) and "high protein" (33%). ([IFIC Food and Health Survey, 2023](#))
- Another poll shows health as consumers' #3 stated reason for overall food purchasing and consumption, after taste and cost, with narrow gaps. ([AP/NORC, 2023](#))
- 67% of consumers claim they are trying to consume more protein, and 18% claim following a "high-protein diet": this was the most commonly reported diet followed, ahead of mindful eating (17%), calorie-counting (12%), clean eating (12%), and intermittent fasting. ([IFIC Food and Health Survey, 2023](#))
- Google searches for "high protein" overtook searches for "low fat" and "low carb" for the first time in 2024. ([Google Trends, via GFI State of the Industry 2023](#))

People trust various sources of information on food health, but many see conflicting information and are uncertain about their choices.

- 60% claim social media leads them to make healthier choices, but 68% claim to have seen “conflicting info...on what they should eat or avoid,” and 60% doubt their choices. ([IFIC Food and Health Survey, 2023](#))
- 55% claim a label from the FDA stating a product is healthy would make them choose it over another. ([IFIC Food and Health Survey, 2023](#))
- 31% claimed to try plant-based meat for the first time based on “friends/family,” while only 8% claimed to do so because of “advice from a medical professional” ([FMI Power of Plant-Based Foods and Beverages, 2023](#))
- 25% claim to be influenced “a lot” by their doctor on what they eat, and fewer for all other sources including family and friends, nutritionists, food celebrities, and others. ([AP/NORC, 2023](#))

People generally believe meat can be healthy, but many also feel that eating less of it can improve health.

- 76% of consumers believe it is “healthy to eat meat.” ([Newsweek poll, 2024](#))
- 74% of consumers agree that “meat and poultry belong in a healthy, balanced lifestyle.” ([FMI Power of Meat, 2024](#))
- Consumers are divided on whether they believe “people can have a healthy diet without eating meat”: 51% agree, while 49% do not. (Poll by Ipsos on behalf of GFI, 2024)
- 53% of consumers agree that eating less meat can improve health. ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2023](#))
- Older consumers are more likely to claim they have been reducing their meat consumption: 13% of Baby Boomers, 10% of Gen X, 10% of Millennials, and only 7% of Gen Z
- 33% of consumers who are trying to reduce their meat consumption do so because of health, the second-highest factor after “too expensive” (40%). ([FMI Power of Meat, 2024](#))
- 34% of consumers agree that “Americans eat too much meat.” ([Mintel US Protein Report: Meat & Meat Alternatives, 2022](#))

People say they consider health risks when choosing to eat meat, but few are familiar with specific risks.

- 59% of consumers claim to consider “negative health effects” in their choice of whether to eat meat. (Poll by Morning Consult on behalf of GFI, 2024)
- A minority of consumers are aware of various health risks from red meat consumption, including: heart disease (28% aware), stroke (17%), colon cancer (14%), and various others. ([Grummon et al., 2022](#))
- 62% of meat eaters say they are “looking for healthier meat products.” ([FMI Power of Meat, 2023](#))
- 45% of consumers who have made changes to which meats they eat say they have done so because of health, 2nd after saving money (71%). ([FMI Power of Meat, 2024](#))

Health is people’s top reason for following meat-reducing or eliminating diets, but fewer follow such diets than worry about negative health effects of meat.

- 33% of consumers are looking to reduce meat consumption. ([FMI Power of Meat, 2023](#))
- 23% of consumers *globally* claim to be reducing meat. ([Euromonitor Voice of the Consumer survey, 2022](#))
- 6% of consumers claim to be fully eliminating meat. ([FMI Power of Meat, 2023](#))
- 60% of those following meat-eliminating diets say they do so primarily because of health. ([IFIC Food and Health Survey, 2023](#))
- 50% of consumers who are eating less meat say they do so because of health, more than for cost (22%). ([AP/NORC, 2023](#))
- 55% of consumers claim to limit or exclude at least one type of meat from their diet, with pork being most common and poultry least common. ([FMI Power of Plant-Based Foods and Beverages, 2023](#))
- 46% of consumers claim to be flexitarian (when the term is defined as “a diet consisting of mostly plant-based food, with the occasional consumption of meat and/or fish), and 37% claim to be eating no/less red meat in the past year. ([McKinsey, 2022](#))

Many people believe plant-based meat is healthy, though perceptions are in flux.

- 60% of consumers believe plant-based meat is “very” or “somewhat” healthy, and 54% say it is very or somewhat natural. (Poll by Morning Consult on behalf of GFI, 2023)
- Consumers who worry about the health effects of conventional meat are more likely to be meat eliminators/reducers and open to/currently purchasing alternative proteins. (Poll by Morning Consult on behalf of GFI, 2023)
- The number of consumers who rated plant-based meat as healthy declined from 2021 to 2022 (from 68% to 60%) but remained steady from 2022 to 2023. ([Deloitte Future of Fresh Surveys, 2021-2023](#))
- An analysis of information about plant-based and conventional meat on X (formerly Twitter) in 2023 found that of almost 300 million posts, almost 100,000 were misinformation or disinformation. 78% of these focused on disparaging plant-based foods or meat-reducing diets, and 24% of disparaging misinformation or disinformation specifically focused on the healthiness of meat alternatives. This equates to more than 170,000 posts about meat alternatives containing misinformation or disinformation. ([Changing Markets Foundation: Truth, Lies, and Culture Wars, 2023](#))
- Consumers’ associations of alternative meat with terms “healthy” and “unprocessed” decreased by 3%, and with taste-related keywords such as “yummy” and “indulgent” decreased by 5% from 2021 to 2022 in an analysis of Instagram sentiment. ([BCG, 2023](#))
- People see plant-based meat alternatives as “less-healthy” than vegetable-forward dishes: 39% vs. 62%. ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2023](#))

Many people believe plant-based meat is low in nutrients they try to avoid in conventional meat and eat it because of that; many are also looking for products that match the protein content of conventional meat.

- Consumers are more likely to describe plant-based meat as lower in nutrients they try to avoid (e.g., saturated fat, cholesterol) rather than high in nutrients they try to increase (protein). (Poll by Morning Consult on behalf of GFI, 2023)
- 35% of consumers who eat plant-based proteins do so because they are trying to limit saturated fat. ([Mintel US Protein Report: Meat & Meat Alternatives, 2022](#))
- Older consumers attend more to health claims about plant-based meat including “fresh,” “healthy,” “high-fiber,” “low-sugar,” “low-salt,” “low-fat,” and “unprocessed,” vs. young consumers, who were more motivated by environmental claims and convenience. ([GFI & Mindlab Implicit Perceptions 2019](#))
- Positive descriptions of plant-based meat like “high protein” and “high fiber” have been shown to be more effective than “reduced harm” claims (“low-fat/sodium/cholesterol” etc.) in predicting purchase likelihood, suggesting that leading more consumers to see plant-based meat as high in nutrients they seek like protein may lead more to purchase. ([GFI & Mindlab Implicit Perceptions, 2019](#))
- Nutritional parity with conventional meat would be motivating to some consumers: 27% of current plant-based meat purchasers said they would buy more plant-based meat if it had the same nutritional content as conventional meat. ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2023](#))

Health, nutrition, and especially protein are many consumers’ top reasons for eating plant-based meat; some say these are more important than taste, though taste is “table stakes” for most consumers to choose plant-based meat.

- 51% of consumers who eat plant-based meat do so because they “believe they’re healthier,” the top reason before the environment (28%) and taste (25%). ([Consumer Reports, 2021](#))
- 43% of people who eat plant-based meat regularly say they do so because of health, and 35% because of nutrition; for reference, this is comparable to the number who say because of taste (42%). ([FMI Power of Plant-Based Foods and Beverages, 2023](#))
- 35% of consumers claim they first tried plant-based meat because of health. 42% claimed because of curiosity and 31% because of “friends/family.” ([FMI Power of Plant-Based Foods and Beverages, 2023](#))
- Consumers who are purchasing plant-based meat more often are most likely to say they do so because of health: 58%, more than variety (47%) and meat reduction (42%) ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2023](#)); this was consistent with the 2021 survey ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2021](#)).
- Health is the top reason that “drives [people] to consume more plant-based” foods generally, with 59% citing it. ([Plant-Based Foods Association and 84.51, via Green Queen](#))
- 39% of consumers claim to eat plant-based meat because it’s “better for [their] health,” vs. only 27% because they “love the taste”; 20% say because of “better nutritional value.” ([McKinsey, 2022](#))

- Digestive health and nutrition are #3 and #5 among consumers' reported top 5 reasons for eating plant-based meat overall, compared to variety (#1), the environment (#2), and animal welfare (#4). ([Food Institute, 2023](#))
- 50% of consumers across the U.S., EU, and APAC rated health and nutritional value as 2 of their top 3 reasons for purchasing plant-based proteins, along with taste. ([BCG & Blue Horizon, 2022](#))
- 75% of consumers across the U.S., EU, and APAC claimed that having a healthier diet was their primary motivator for starting to consume alternative proteins. ([BCG & Blue Horizon, 2022](#))
- People globally, not just in the U.S. are most likely to cite health as their top reason for eating plant-based meat: 35% claim health as their top reason, compared to taste at 25%. ([Euromonitor Voice of the Industry survey, 2022](#))

Taste is the most common reason people do not try or do not continue to eat plant-based meat, but health and nutrition are factors for some.

- Taste is the top reason consumers cite for trying and then not repurchasing plant-based meat and for never trying it, with over 40% citing this; fewer than 20% cite health and nutrition as their reasons. ([FMI Power of Plant-Based Foods and Beverages, 2023](#))
- Consumers are more likely to cite “taste/flavor concerns” (48%) as reasons they have not tried plant-based meat, vs.: “meat is a better source of nutrition” (35%), “plant-based meat is too expensive” (34%), “texture concerns” (24%), and “too processed” (21%). ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2023](#))
- 35% of consumers not eating plant-based meat cite health as a reason, while 48% cite taste. ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2023](#))
- People who have tried plant-based meat then stopped eating it (lapsed consumers) are most likely to cite taste as the reason they stopped (48%); fewer cite conventional meat having better nutrition (35%), and very few say it's because plant-based meat products are unhealthy (7%) in general. ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2023](#))
- In simulated purchase contexts, sensory claims (“delicious,” “tasty,” etc.) have been shown to have an up-to-2x-stronger relationship to purchase likelihood for plant-based meat than health and nutrition claims (“nutritious,” “healthy,” “clean-label”). ([GFI & Mindlab Implicit Perceptions, 2019](#))
- Consumers who have tried plant-based meat but stopped eating it rarely cite health as their top reason, only 6%. (Poll by Morning Consult on behalf of GFI, 2023)

People are trying to reduce processed foods, and some see plant-based meat as processed and would eat more if it were less processed.

- 43% of consumers claim to be reducing consumption of processed foods in the past year. ([McKinsey, 2022](#))
- 61% of consumers claim they try to avoid processed foods. ([IFIC Food and Health Survey, 2023](#))
- 32% claim to consider processing when choosing meat or meat alternatives. ([Mintel US Protein Report: Meat & Meat Alternatives, 2022](#))
- Consumers who eat plant-based proteins are more likely to claim that minimal processing is important to them than those who only eat conventional proteins (41% vs. 32%). ([Mintel US Protein Report: Meat & Meat Alternatives, 2022](#))
- A minority (19%) of consumers associate “plant-based meat substitute” with “processed”; this is higher than their association of conventional meat types with being processed, ranging from 5% for seafood to 11% for beef. ([Mintel US Protein Report: Meat & Meat Alternatives, 2022](#))
- Around 1/4 of consumers claim they would purchase more plant-based meat alternatives if they were less processed or had the same nutritional content as meat, lower than the number who would purchase if they tasted indistinguishable from meat (36%). ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2023](#))
- Most consumers say they would eat more plant-based meat substitutes if they were less processed (60% of consumers, 59% of meat eaters, 71% of vegetarians/pescatarians). ([Mintel US Plant-Based Proteins Market Report, 2021](#))

About GFI

The Good Food Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit working internationally to make alternative proteins like plant-based and cultivated meat delicious, affordable, and accessible. GFI advances open-access research, mobilizes resources and talent, and empowers partners across the food system to create a sustainable, secure, and just protein supply. GFI is funded entirely by private philanthropic support.