

“EAT-Lancet” is hard to digest



Recall that back in 2019, the prestigious international medical journal *Lancet* issued a call for curbing meat consumption. The EAT-Lancet Commission invoked the alleged health benefits of reducing intake of animal protein and claimed plant-based eating could help save the planet. The food industry and agribusiness applauded as it contemplated market opportunities for novel plant-based meat substitutes.

I inveighed against EAT-Lancet then in a column entitled “Nutrition community to *Lancet*: ‘EAT this!’”. In it I stated:

“Is it, as some insist, a rational plan for curbing our modern epidemics of diet-related degenerative diseases while at the same time averting a planetary calamity? Or a wrongheaded blueprint for a command-and-control global food economy with incalculable effects on human health and oversold benefits for climate change?”

Well, lately, as I predicted, there’s been a flurry of backlash against EAT-Lancet. A letter-to-the-editor was published this year in *Lancet* that criticizes the assumptions underlying EAT-Lancet: The group of distinguished scientists note that there’s something suspect about the *Lancet*’s numbers indicting meat as a major cause of death and disease:

“ . . . by comparison with previous estimates, the 2019 estimates of deaths

attributable to unprocessed red meat intake have increased 36-fold, and estimates of DALYs [Disability-adjusted life years] attributable to unprocessed red meat intake have increased 18-fold.”

REALLY?? 896,000 deaths worldwide per year due to meat consumption? It’s laughable that a previous assessment—just 2 years before, in 2017—by the same body that issued the EAT-Lancet call-to-action, only attributed 25,000 deaths to red meat, and red meat intake was the least important of 15 dietary risk factors recorded. Why the about-face?

The EAT-Lancet authors appear to have stacked the deck against meat. They cherry-pick studies that substantiate their plant-based diet bias when other authoritative sources found no links:

“These findings of additional causal relationships for red meat are not in agreement with other recently conducted systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The Nutritional Recommendations (also known as NutriRECS) international consortium performed four parallel systematic reviews of randomised trials and observational studies. The consortium reported finding low to very low certainty evidence that diets lower in unprocessed red meat might result in very small reductions in risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, myocardial infarction, type 2 diabetes, and overall lifetime cancer mortality. The 2018 World Cancer Research Fund’s Continuous Update Project Expert Report judged the evidence for a link between red meat intake and breast cancer to be limited and that no conclusion could be reached regarding a causal or protective relationship.”

The PURE study, published last year in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, also concluded that, while processed meat might have some adverse effects, *“In a large multinational prospective study, we did not find significant associations between unprocessed red meat and poultry intake and mortality or major CVD.”*

The EAT-Lancet authors discount meat as having “zero” nutritional value, but the latest *Lancet* letter-to-the-editor pushes back:

“If the current public health message advising moderate consumption of red meat as part of a healthy balanced diet is replaced by the message that any intake of red meat is harmful, this change will probably adversely affect iron deficiency anaemia, sarcopenia, and child and maternal malnutrition—these conditions and their associated risk factors are already responsible for considerably greater global disease burdens than a diet high in red meat, particularly in low-income and middle-income countries.”

And a recent Cornell University study concludes that substituting plant-based faux meats for beef might reduce CO2 levels a bit, but would have huge negative ramifications for our economy and workforce. There might be *“. . . substantial disruptions observed across the food system, particularly in the beef-value chain, which could contract substantially by as much as 45% under the 60%-replacement scenario – challenging the livelihoods of the more than 1.5 million people employed in these sectors.”*

Not to mention the health depredations caused by consumption of ultra-processed meat substitutes—think “Impossible Burger”—rich in carbohydrates, processed oils, and novel GMO ingredients!

Critics urge we hit “pause” on the EAT-Lancet blueprint for a global food economy based on plant foods:

“Unless, and until, all new or updated reviews and meta-analyses pertaining to all dietary risk factors are published, having undergone comprehensive independent peer review, we think it would be highly inappropriate and imprudent for the GBD 2019 dietary risk estimates to be used in any national or international policy documents, nor in any regulatory nor legislative decisions.”

That’s a call for transparency and disclosure of the enormous conflicts of interest that underlie EAT-Lancet. As I wrote in 2019:

“The majority of EAT-Lancet scientists are pro-vegetarian or pro-vegan. Nina Teicholz writes ‘An examination of the EAT-Lancet authors reveals that more than 80% of them (31 out of 37) espoused vegetarian views before joining the EAT-Lancet project.’ The author of the study, Walter Willett, a distinguished Harvard professor of nutrition, is a big fan of ‘plant-based diets’; his numerous conflicts of interest, including support from vegetarian groups, are enumerated here.”

EAT-Lancet 2.0 is scheduled for release in 2024, with additional guidance for policy. Expect more recommendations to drastically curtail animal food consumption. That’s why skeptical scientists, farmer groups, and health organizations have called for a retraction of the original EAT-Lancet report—it just doesn’t hold up to scientific scrutiny, and never belonged in a journal that styles itself an exemplar of “evidence-based medicine”.

I’ll stick to my guns about what I wrote about EAT-Lancet in 2019:

“It’s one thing to claim that it’s healthier for humans to eschew most animal protein. But to hitch that proposition—which remains highly contested—to a completely separate and distinct controversial environmental agenda is rhetorically powerful, but inherently unscientific. It’s almost like saying: ‘Even if we’re jumping the gun about the universal health benefits of minimizing animal protein consumption, there’s a planetary emergency that dictates immediate rationing of meat.’ But even if the far-reaching environmental benefits were to pan out—which is debatable—does this justify inflicting an academic’s version of a healthy diet on every man, woman and child on Earth?”

Credit to *Lancet* for taking on this debate. The battle lines are drawn, and the stakes are high—for global human health.