Press Release

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Shrinking portions drive fall in meat consumption, research shows

Reduced portion sizes are the main driver of the decline in meat consumption in the UK, outpacing other behaviours such as meat-free days, a study shows.

As meat consumption in the UK continues to fall, having dropped by more than 15 per cent from 2008 to 2019, research shows that smaller portions accounted for 52 per cent of the overall reduction.

This approach significantly surpasses the impact of other strategies such as meat-free days and meat-free meals, researchers say.

Experts from the University of Edinburgh’s Global Academy of Agriculture and Food Systems used data from a national dietary survey in the decade leading up to 2019.

They found that men and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who typically consume more meat, were more likely to reduce their intake by choosing smaller portions.

The study also showed that completely cutting out meat was more likely to be adopted by women and people from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

Researchers say that policymakers should continue to develop strategies focused on promoting smaller portions, particularly for those reluctant to eliminate meat entirely.

In addition to helping reduce meat consumption, smaller portion sizes could improve health outcomes related to the overconsumption of red and processed meats, experts say.

The study also found that white meat consumption has risen. Researchers say this is likely due to its lower cost and perceived health benefits compared with red and processed meats.

The study is published in the journal Nature Food. The study team also involved researchers from the University of Edinburgh’s School of Geosciences and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Lead author Alexander Vonderschmidt, from the University of Edinburgh’s Global Academy of Agriculture and Food Systems, said: “This research offers critical insights into how the UK's dietary landscape is shifting and could guide future interventions aimed at encouraging healthier and more sustainable eating habits. By understanding the factors driving these changes, such as portion size reduction and demographic influences, policymakers and health professionals can design targeted strategies that resonate with different consumer groups.”

Professor Lindsay Jaacks, Personal Chair of Global Health and Nutrition at the Global Academy of Agriculture and Food Systems, said: “By reducing portion sizes, we see a sustainable and achievable approach to cutting down meat consumption, especially for those less inclined to adopt meat-free days. This strategy presents a practical path forward for both improving health outcomes and addressing environmental concerns.”

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