Chapter 7
Meat and Dietary Guidelines

Rosemary Stanton
University of New South Wales, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to describe how meat fits into recommended dietary guidelines. In Australia, meat is included in one of the five food groups. However, this food group should not be described as the ‘meat group’ as it includes alternative choices. These include animal products such as seafood, poultry and eggs but also plant-based alternatives such as legumes, tofu, nuts and seeds. Choosing a range of foods from within this group contributes to a healthy dietary pattern with nuts, seeds and legumes providing extra benefits. Increasing plant-based choices also makes it easier for those who consume meat to keep to the weekly limit recommended to reduce the risk of health problems associated with a high consumption of red meat. Processed meats are not included in any of the five food groups and are now seen as ‘discretionary’ foods.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, the National Health and Medical Research Council released its latest Dietary Guidelines in 2013 (NHMRC, 2013). Unlike previous versions, the latest Australian guidelines based their evidence and advice on foods rather than nutrients.

In formulating the guidelines, key sources of evidence included:

1. Previous guidelines and their supporting documentation;
2. An evidence report designed to systematically answer a series of questions about relationships between specific foods and health outcomes. For this report, the expert Working Committee identified areas where new evidence, any changes or uncertainty might be relevant;
3. A Food Modelling System, developed to identify and check a range of combinations of amounts and types of foods that could be consumed to meet nutritional needs as detailed in Australia’s Nutrient Reference Values; and
4. Key authoritative reports from governments and august bodies such as the World Cancer Research Fund International.

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Among the findings of all the deliberations, the benefits of an increased intake of vegetables, fruit, wholegrains, legumes, nuts and seeds stood out. Australians were consuming too little of each of these plant foods to meet what the evidence shows to be a healthful dietary pattern. Since the guidelines were released, results of the 2011-12 national survey, (ABS, 2014) show the situation has worsened with decreases in consumption of vegetables, wholegrains and legumes compared with the previous survey in 1995 (ABS, 1999). Fruit consumption has remained low, at about half the level recommended by the dietary guidelines. Consumption of nuts has increased but from a very low base and remains well below recommendations. This latest survey clearly shows that the major problem in the Australian diet is a high consumption of “discretionary foods and drinks” (also called ‘extras’ or ‘junk foods’). These products now contribute 35% of adults’ and 41% of children’s kilojoule intake (NHMRC, 2013).

MEAT AND DIETARY GUIDELINES

Where Does Meat Fit?

Meat is a popular component of the typical Australian diet, especially among men, many of whom consume large quantities.

Nutritionally, meat scores well. It is a good source of protein, iron, zinc and several B complex vitamins. Other foods can supply adequate quantities of each of these nutrients, although if meat is not consumed, some other animal product (poultry, milk, yoghurt, cheese, eggs or seafood) will be required to supply vitamin B12, as this vitamin occurs naturally only in animal foods. Those who choose a purely plant-based (vegan) diet need supplementary B12, either from plant foods fortified with sufficient quantities of the vitamin or as a supplement.

Lean red meat was included in one of the five food groups with other choices listed as chicken or other poultry, fish or other seafood, eggs, legumes/beans, tofu, nuts or seeds. The expansion of the named foods to include more plant choices in this food group in the most recent guidelines not only met the nutrient requirements of diets modelled in the Food Modelling System, but also provided extra benefits from the inclusion of nuts, seeds and legumes.

Some objected to the increased emphasis on plant sources of protein in this group and lobbied for a separate set of guidelines for vegetarians. This was not acceptable to the Working Committee, especially as the Evidence Report noted the need to limit red meat and move processed meats out of this food group and into the category of discretionary foods. Those who follow a vegetarian diet were also opposed to separate guidelines and supported the increased variety of foods now included in this group. Perhaps most importantly, a significant number of people are not vegetarians, but do not choose to eat meat every day. On the day prior to the interview for the recent national nutrition survey, for example, 31% of people did not consume meat or poultry (ABS, 2014). This highlights the need for the group of foods that contribute a significant quantity of protein to include alternatives to meat.

Questions about Meat

The NHMRC Working Committee set a series of questions about the role of particular foods in obesity and chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease and stroke, diabetes, various cancers, hypertension, eye health, bone health, and problems with dental and mental health. Any potential risks were