

## **The Benefits of Pasture-Raised Livestock**

*From [sustainabletable.org](http://sustainabletable.org)*

Truly sustainable livestock farming requires the use of a pasture-based system. Pasture-raised animals roam freely in their natural environment where they're able to eat nutritious grasses and other plants that their bodies are adapted to digest. In addition to dramatically improving the welfare of farm animals, pasturing also helps reduce environmental damage, and yields meat, eggs, and dairy products that are tastier and more nutritious than foods produced on factory farms.

### **Animal Health Benefits**

Animals raised on pasture enjoy a much higher quality of life than those confined within factory farms. When raised on open pasture, animals are able to move around freely and carry out their natural behaviors. This lifestyle is impossible to achieve on industrial farms, where thousands of animals are crowded into confined facilities, often without access to fresh air or sunlight. These stressful conditions are a breeding ground for bacteria and the animals frequently become ill, so factory farms must routinely treat them with [antibiotics](#) to prevent outbreaks of disease. <sup>i</sup>

Grazing on pasture is especially beneficial for cattle and other ruminants, whose bodies are developed to eat grass. The roughage provided by grasses and other plants allows ruminants to produce saliva, which helps neutralize acids that exist naturally in their digestive systems. When taken off pasture and put on a diet of grain, a ruminant will produce less saliva, causing an increase in acidity within its digestive tract. As a result, grain-fed cattle often suffer from a number of health problems including intestinal damage, dehydration, liver abscesses and even death. <sup>ii</sup> Despite the fact that grain diets can sicken cattle and other [ruminants](#), factory farms feed these animals grain (usually corn or soybeans) because it's a cheap way to fatten animals and force them to grow to market weight as quickly as possible.

Pasture-raised animals also enjoy a diet free of the unnatural [feed](#) additives routinely administered on factory farms. Industrial farms frequently supplement animal feed with a range of byproducts including chicken manure, plate waste from restaurants, and animal blood in order to bolster the quantity and protein content of the feed. Antibiotics and artificial [hormones](#) are also added to promote rapid growth. On pasture, animals get all the nutrients they need from grass and forage (other plants), and some animals, like chickens, get additional vitamins and protein from eating insects.

### **Human Health Benefits**

A growing body of research indicates that pasture-raised meat, eggs, and dairy products are better for [consumers' health](#) than conventionally-raised, grain-fed foods. In addition to being lower in calories and total fat, pasture-raised foods have higher levels of vitamins, and a healthier balance of omega-3 and omega-6 fats than conventional meat and dairy products.

Studies have shown that milk from pasture-fed cows has as much as five times the CLA (a "good" type of fatty acid) as milk from grain-fed cows. <sup>iii</sup> And meat from pasture-fed cows has from 200 to 500 percent more CLA as a proportion of total fatty acids than meat from cows that eat a primarily grain-based diet. <sup>iv</sup>

Free-range chickens have 21% less total fat, 30% less saturated fat and 28% fewer calories than their factory-farmed counterparts. <sup>v</sup> Eggs from poultry raised on pasture have 10% less fat, 40% more vitamin A and 400% more omega-3's. <sup>vi</sup>

### **Environmental Benefits**

Pasture-based systems can help the [environment](#), especially through fertilizing the soil and by reducing the amount of grain produced as feed. And unlike industrial farms, which rely on large

amounts of fossil fuels to truck feed and animal waste, pasture-based systems take advantage of the animal's ability to feed itself and spread its own manure.

### **Keeping Small Farmers in Business**

When you buy pastured meat, you're not only taking a step to safeguard your [health](#), protect the [environment](#), and improve [animal wellbeing](#), you're also supporting sustainable farming and the farmers who choose to practice it. Small, local family farmers are invaluable members of the nation's rural [communities](#) and play a key role as stewards of the land.

### **Finding and Cooking Pastured Meat, Eggs and Dairy**

Pasture-raised foods are becoming increasingly popular! To find farms, stores, and restaurants that supply pasture-raised meat, eggs, and dairy products, visit our [Eat Well Guide](#).

Since farmers typically slaughter their pasture-raised animals seasonally, it may be difficult to find pastured meats year-round. However, since these meats are often sold in bulk, you can buy a large quantity to store in your freezer until the next season comes around.

Keep in mind that the consistency, texture, color and flavors of food from pasture-raised animals differ from those of conventionally-produced foods. Pasture-raised chickens produce eggs with brighter, more orange-colored yolks than conventional eggs, and butter from pasture-raised cows tends to have a darker yellow color than the butter you get at the supermarket. Since pastured meats contain less fat, they must be cooked more slowly than conventional meats.

### **Did You Know?**

Raising grain-fed cattle is extraordinarily resource-intensive; a cow must consume about 8 pounds of grain in order to yield one pound of meat. <sup>vii</sup>

It is estimated that 12 to 32 % of all feedlot cattle develop liver abscesses as a result of the high-grain diet. <sup>viii</sup>

If you, like the average American, eat 67 pounds of beef per year, then switching from conventional beef to pastured beef would reduce your yearly calorie intake by 16,642 calories! <sup>ix</sup>