

Good, Better, Best: Cutting Carbon From Your Diet

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This is the final in a series of five articles that help you find ways to reduce your carbon footprint by looking at the main carbon culprits in the average American's lifestyle.

Whatever deficiencies [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#) may have, few people would argue with the idea that food is a basic necessity that outweighs most others. It's only natural for people to become defensive and feel threatened when something as fundamental as their food is criticized. But the acronym SAD to describe the [standard American diet](#) is more than just a convenient pun. What could be sadder than depending on a diet that threatens your continued existence?

The way most people eat today is a major contributor to climate change as well as a poor basis for healthy living. And it threatens our ability to continue producing enough food in the future. If we don't rethink how we eat now, the question becomes whether we will eat in a few decades.

Carbon Footprints

Because carbon dioxide emissions are a leading cause of climate change, the amount of carbon dioxide released by a particular activity can serve as a useful shorthand for its environmental impact. This measurement is known as a [carbon footprint](#).

Food Footprints

Americans are more accustomed to obsessing over the nutrition of their food than its environmental impact, but it turns out that our [foodprint](#) is a major portion of our carbon footprint, [comprising 14 percent](#) of our household carbon emissions.

You can significantly cut your foodprint. Be mindful of what you eat and how your food is grown, produced, and transported. If you're not convinced that what you eat can have global repercussions, start by [calculating](#) the footprint of your own diet and reading about how food production [impacts](#) climate change.

Good

Every step of a food item's life produces carbon. But a good place to start is at the end of the consumption process, with food waste. Americans waste approximately 40% of the food we produce each year.

About [one-third](#) of the world's annual food production goes uneaten every year. [Americans waste](#) \$218 billion dollars' worth of food every year — about 400 pounds per person, approximately \$660 each. Of course, the goal is not to eat more. The goal is to waste less so that we don't have to produce as much.

[Simple ways](#) to reduce your own [food waste](#) include meal planning, shopping from a list, eating leftovers before preparing new meals, and storing food properly to [keep it fresh](#) long enough to eat it.

Better

Although it often comes with a price premium, it's better to buy sustainably produced food.

Whenever possible, try to buy [humanely raised](#) meats. Humane farming practices are less carbon-intensive than industrial methods. Many consumers are suspicious of the value of [organic labels](#), but the pesticides and chemical fertilizers used in conventional farming do produce additional carbon emissions and degrade soils, which are an important carbon sink. Although food transport is a surprisingly small contributor to food's lifecycle emissions, food that is produced for [local consumption](#) rather than transport does produce less carbon and is often grown using more sustainable practices.

[Shopping your values](#) can be hard. Take matters into your hands and produce some of your own food in a backyard [organic garden](#). Maximize your efforts by choosing to grow crops that are most carbon-intensive when purchased – commercially grown vegetables like [asparagus](#) have a surprisingly large footprint.

Cutting down on the most [climate-damaging foods](#) through tweaks like Meatless Mondays or swapping ingredients to make a [vegan version](#) of a familiar dish take a little effort, but they can affect your carbon bottom line. They are also an important step towards doing your best to cut carbon from your diet.

Best

It requires a major commitment, but [a vegan diet](#) is the best way for individuals to minimize the environmental impact of their food.

Like any major lifestyle change, the switch to a sustainable diet is most sustainable when taken in steps. Start with the changes that seem most palatable to you – eliminating the most carbon-intensive meats first; eating one vegetarian/vegan meal per day or one day per week. Experiment with vegetarian proteins. Try substituting them for half of the meat in familiar recipes. Build up a palette of new [meatless recipes](#) before giving up animal products altogether.

Going vegan is hard, but the benefits are significant. At least [one study](#) has found that a vegan diet generates one-fifth of the greenhouse gases of a meat-heavy diet, and is also healthier by most key measures.

Read the first article in this five-part series: [Good, Better, Best: Reducing Your Transportation Carbon Footprint](#)

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