

Popular Science Abstract

Swapping meat for legumes, what would it take?

If you live in Sweden, chances are you consume meat almost every day. Beans, lentils, and peas, on the other hand, probably appear on your plate only a few times a week or less. This difference matters because eating less meat and more legumes is one of the most impactful dietary changes a person can make for both personal health and planetary health. Meat consumption is associated with colorectal cancer, cardiovascular disease, and a significant percentage of greenhouse gas emissions in Sweden. In contrast, legumes are rich in fiber and folate, important nutrients that most Swedish consumers have too little of in their diets and have a fraction of the climate footprint of meat.

If there are such strong claims about the reduction of meat and increasing legumes, why aren't more people already making the swap? This is exactly what this study aims to understand. A survey was conducted among 398 adults living in Sweden, asking them about their meat and legume eating habits, what they think about both foods, and what would need to happen for them to replace some of the meat in their diet with legumes.

The answer came down largely to taste. The respondents rated tastiness as the most important factor when considering the swap. It was more important than health, cost, or environmental impact. And while people generally acknowledged that legumes are healthy, affordable, and good for the environment, those positive qualities were not enough on their own to motivate change. Meat simply tastes better to most people, and that is an important barrier to overcome to make this dietary change.

A few other findings stood out. Younger people tend to eat more legumes than older generations, possibly because legumes were historically associated with poverty in Sweden and older consumers grew up in a time when eating meat was seen as prosperous. Men also consume significantly more meat than women, a pattern that research suggests is tied to cultural associations between consuming meat and masculinity.

One of the more surprising findings was on the role of social influence. When asked directly, most respondents stated that what others eat around them has little impact on their own diets. Yet the data showed that people who eat more legumes or meat tend to be surrounded by people who also consume them frequently. This suggests that dietary change may spread more naturally through social environments than through individual persuasion. If legumes become more common in cafeterias, school lunches, and restaurant menus, people may naturally adopt them in their diets.

The takeaway for anyone working to make the Swedish diets healthier and more sustainable through popularizing legumes is to focus on making legumes taste great, making them easy to find and prepare, and familiarizing people with legumes in public settings where people can discover them without any pressure, the rest will come.