# Why quitting meat remains a challenge despite Scotland’s sustainability goals



# The Challenge of Quitting Meat: Insights from Scotland’s Rowett Institute Study

Transitioning to a vegetarian diet can be a daunting task, often met with a blend of enthusiasm and reality checks. Personal experiences, such as a young man’s failed attempt at vegetarianism spurred by a romantic relationship, serve as reminders of the complexities surrounding dietary change. This very tension is at the heart of a study conducted by The Rowett Institute in Aberdeen, aiming to decipher why many struggle to stick with vegetarian diets, even when motivated by sustainability concerns.

Set against Scotland's ambitious plan to reduce meat consumption by 20% by 2030, the study, labelled LESS: Meat (Lived Experience of Sustainability in Scotland), is specifically designed to explore the barriers individuals face when attempting to shift towards more sustainable diets. Dr David McBey, a lead researcher, emphasised the focus on the “lived experience of trying to do the right thing,” acknowledging the myriad factors—cultural habits, cravings, and convenience—that make this transition complex. As he put it, meat occupies a "special place" in many people's lives, transcending mere sustenance to embody cultural significance and emotional connections.

Unlike typical dietary studies that provide structured meal plans, participants in this research were required to take personal responsibility for their food choices over an eight-week period, logging their successes and struggles through an online portal. This methodology aimed to capture a realistic view of navigating meat reduction in everyday life. Participants faced familiar challenges, such as meal planning and societal pressures, while also discovering new plant-based meals that could effectively substitute for meat.

The broader implications of this study resonate with recent research from the University of Edinburgh, which suggested that reducing red meat consumption by even modest amounts could play a significant role in meeting climate goals. The study indicated that a reduction to 70 grams of red meat per day could achieve a 16% decrease in total meat intake. However, it also noted the potential nutritional pitfalls of drastically cutting red meat presence in diets, raising concerns about deficiencies in essential nutrients like calcium and zinc. Effective strategies must take into account not only environmental goals but also nutritional health to ensure that dietary adjustments do not adversely impact the well-being of participants.

Similar findings emerged from a study at the University of Cambridge, which highlighted the carbon footprints associated with different types of meat consumption. Ruminant meats, such as beef, emit significant CO2 levels; thus, transitioning to more plant-based foods could lead to substantial emissions reductions. Nevertheless, barriers to such dietary shifts remain prevalent. For instance, awareness, limited access to alternatives, and economic constraints were identified as factors hindering individuals from fully embracing a meat-reduced lifestyle.

Complicating this dietary shift further is the advice from Food Standards Scotland, cautioning against a blanket reduction in meat and dairy intake, especially since many individuals already face risks of low micronutrient intakes. Advocating for a balanced approach, the organisation stresses the importance of ensuring that dietary changes do not compromise essential nutrient intake—particularly for vulnerable populations. This calls for targeted interventions that consider the socio-economic disparities in dietary habits across the region.

David McKay from the Soil Association articulated the intricate dance policymakers must undertake: balancing the environmental benefits of reduced meat consumption with the socio-cultural significance of meat within Scotland. This public discourse often skews in polarised directions, but the consensus remains clear—any effective nutritional strategy must also support the livelihoods tied to the meat industry.

An additional perspective from research by SEFARI focuses on the inequalities in dietary patterns across Scotland, noting that individuals from more deprived areas often consume higher quantities of red and processed meats. Addressing these disparities is crucial in formulating effective public health campaigns that promote healthier eating habits inclusively.

Ultimately, the journey of embracing a meat-free diet—while often fraught with challenges—offers participants valuable lessons on their eating habits. The initial experience of one participant from The Rowett Institute study, who found a newfound appreciation for plant-based meals and engaged in meaningful conversations about food choices, mirrors a broader potential toward sustainable eating practices. While the participant might not have become a vegetarian by study's end, they made strides in reducing meat consumption, viewing it more as a treat than a necessity—an outcome that aligns with the wider environmental and health goals Scotland aspires to achieve.

In this evolving dietary landscape, there is much to learn not only about the individual choices we make but also about the collective societal shifts necessary to facilitate a sustainable future.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-and-wellbeing/6746554/why-quitting-meat-hard-aberdeen-scientists/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-and-wellbeing/6746554/why-quitting-meat-hard-aberdeen-scientists/), [[2]](https://www.ed.ac.uk/research-innovation/latest-research-news/lowered-red-meat-intake-would-hit-climate-goals)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.globalfood.cam.ac.uk/news/reducing-meat-consumption-uk-obstacles-and-opportunities), [[4]](https://meatmanagement.com/news/blanket-reduction-in-meat-could-cause-nutrient-deficiencies-fss/71172.article)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/climate-change-means-our-diets-must-change-but-particularly-in-scotland-red-meat-should-still-be-a-part-of-it-david-mckay-soil-association-4123565), [[6]](https://vet.ed.ac.uk/global-agriculture-food-systems/news-media/news/smaller-portions-drive-fall-in)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://sefari.scot/blog/2022/03/08/diet-inequalities-and-food-patterns-in-scotland)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/lifestyle/health-and-wellbeing/6746554/why-quitting-meat-hard-aberdeen-scientists/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/research-innovation/latest-research-news/lowered-red-meat-intake-would-hit-climate-goals> - Research from the University of Edinburgh indicates that reducing red meat consumption in Scotland could significantly advance climate change targets. By decreasing intake to 70g or less per day, a 16% reduction in total meat consumption could be achieved. Further reductions to 60g per day would align with the Climate Change Committee's recommendation of a 20% decrease by 2030. However, the study also highlights potential nutritional challenges, emphasizing the need for balanced dietary adjustments to prevent deficiencies in essential nutrients like calcium, iodine, and zinc.
3. <https://www.globalfood.cam.ac.uk/news/reducing-meat-consumption-uk-obstacles-and-opportunities> - A study from the University of Cambridge explores the environmental impact of meat consumption and the challenges in reducing intake. Ruminant meats, such as beef and mutton, have substantial carbon footprints, with a small steak emitting about 5kg of CO2. Shifting to plant-based foods can significantly lower emissions. However, the research identifies barriers to dietary change, including lack of awareness, economic constraints, and limited access to alternatives, suggesting that policy interventions are necessary to facilitate sustainable eating habits.
4. <https://meatmanagement.com/news/blanket-reduction-in-meat-could-cause-nutrient-deficiencies-fss/71172.article> - Food Standards Scotland (FSS) cautions against a blanket reduction in meat and dairy consumption, citing potential nutrient deficiencies among vulnerable populations. While reducing meat intake can aid climate change mitigation, the FSS emphasizes that many individuals are already at risk of low micronutrient intakes, which could be exacerbated by such reductions. The organization advocates for a balanced approach, ensuring that dietary changes do not compromise essential nutrient intake, particularly for those with existing deficiencies.
5. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/climate-change-means-our-diets-must-change-but-particularly-in-scotland-red-meat-should-still-be-a-part-of-it-david-mckay-soil-association-4123565> - David McKay of the Soil Association discusses the complexities of reducing meat consumption in Scotland to meet climate change targets. He highlights the challenges faced by policymakers, including the potential impact on the farming industry and the polarized public debate surrounding meat consumption. McKay emphasizes the importance of balancing environmental objectives with the viability of the meat supply chain and the cultural significance of meat in Scottish diets.
6. <https://vet.ed.ac.uk/global-agriculture-food-systems/news-media/news/smaller-portions-drive-fall-in> - Research from the University of Edinburgh reveals that reduced meat portion sizes have been a significant driver in the decline of meat consumption in the UK. Between 2008 and 2019, smaller portions accounted for over half of the overall reduction, surpassing other strategies like meat-free days. The study suggests that encouraging smaller portion sizes could be an effective and manageable approach to promoting healthier and more sustainable eating habits among consumers.
7. <https://sefari.scot/blog/2022/03/08/diet-inequalities-and-food-patterns-in-scotland> - Research from SEFARI highlights significant dietary inequalities in Scotland, particularly concerning meat consumption. The study found that individuals in more deprived areas tend to have lower-quality diets, with higher consumption of red and processed meats compared to those in less deprived areas. This dietary pattern contributes to health disparities, including higher rates of obesity and chronic diseases. The research underscores the need for targeted interventions to promote healthier eating habits across all socio-economic groups in Scotland.