

PUBLIC HEALTH

Eating healthy or eating right

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Governments attempt to provide guidelines for their citizens on healthy eating, but environmental, ethical and other concerns may conflict with these and place the consumer in a dilemma.

Sandrine Péneau and colleagues from the University of Paris investigated whether consumers in France experience a dilemma between health guidelines and environmental concerns when purchasing meat, fish and dairy products and how this interacts with overall diet quality and socio-demographic factors. A survey of 22,935 participants, sub sampled from the NutriNet-Santé longitudinal cohort study of 122,091 individuals, revealed that 13%, 12% and 5% experienced a dilemma when purchasing meat, fish and dairy, respectively, with one-fifth of participants experiencing a dilemma for at least one category. Interestingly, participants with lower income and aged over 50 were the most likely to report having a dilemma. Data from food diaries collected over two years showed that those with a dilemma consumed less meat and dairy products, but also had better overall diet quality. The greatest dilemma was around meat from ruminants — the product with the highest carbon footprint — suggesting that dilemmas occur more where there is the strongest potential environmental impact.

Many consumers clearly want to eat both healthily and sustainably. Introducing more public health information that integrates sustainability could help them to achieve this and reduce purchasing dilemmas.

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