

While we know that the food we eat affects our health, how does it impact on the health of the planet?



ECO EATING

Order a falafel roll for your lunch, and you score pretty well on nutrition – a good dose of fibre with a healthy mix of minerals and vitamins. But should you also consider how seasonal its contents are, how far they have been transported, and how much water was used in their production?

FOOD MILES

A new term is being dropped into conversations about the environment – food miles. Transporting food from its source to your plate contributes to carbon emissions, and the further it has to travel, the greater the environmental cost – or so goes the argument.

In the UK for instance, onions are imported from New Zealand, a journey of over 19,000 kilometres, while a recent study in Victoria estimated that a typical food basket clocked up 21,073 kilometres in total.

On reading these figures it makes sense to buy locally when you can, supporting local producers at the same time. Buying fresh produce that's in season from local farmers will reduce the environmental costs of food processing, storage, and travel, as well as save you dollars – and often provide better nutrition too.

Shunning overseas food items, however, isn't always as green as it seems. Some environmentalists argue that food miles are far too simplistic a concept, and that produce from the other side of the world can actually have a smaller CO₂ footprint than a more local equivalent.

Avoiding food products from developing nations (whose carbon footprint, by

comparison, is minimal) can damage the economies of these countries. At the same time, that food item is produced with a much smaller impact on the environment, as there is minimal use of powered farming equipment or pesticides.

So perhaps when deciding what to buy, you should consider 'fair miles' as well as 'air miles', and make your own judgement.

PLANTS & THE PLANET

It takes about 100 times more water to produce a kilogram of animal protein than it does to produce the same quantity of protein from grains or vegetables. The meat we produce has a big impact on land and water use, greenhouse gas emissions, soil erosion, and logging.

While this doesn't mean you should eliminate meat from your diet (meat provides many essential nutrients), making a choice to cut back on animal food and load up your plate with more plant produce will bring benefits to your health as well as the planet.

Plant-based meals can help protect your heart, lower your blood pressure, and reduce your risk of cancer, diabetes, and other lifestyle diseases, while being naturally low in kilojoules.

Aim to limit meat-based main meals to about four per week, and experiment with vegetarian options, such as vegetable pastas, curries, and burgers. Remember that when you do eat meat, one portion should be no larger than a deck of cards – and serve it alongside a salad.

Main sources: Good Food News, published by Sanitarium; Choice magazine; The Sydney Morning Herald at smh.com.au; and The Telegraph UK at telegraph.co.uk.

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