

Nudging meat off the menu

September 30 2019, by David McBey and Alex Johnstone



The face of protein in the 21st century? Credit: [Boris Smokrovic/Unsplash](#), [CC BY](#)

To keep global heating [below 2°C](#), the world's appetite for meat must change. This will mean reducing meat consumption in most developed countries and limiting the increase in developing countries. But how do you convince people to break the habit of a lifetime?

Our [recent paper](#), published in the journal *Appetite*, looked at how "nudging" might help. This is an approach from behavioral psychology that aims to subtly change a person's behavior. In the same way a gentle nudge on the shoulder might alert you to something nearby, subliminal nudges in advertising or on signs help to affect the subconscious choices people make. To change a person's diet, nudges could help them choose meat substitutes over the real thing.

It's possible for people to still enjoy the taste of meat with alternatives—varieties of insects are high in protein, and their environmental impact is minimal. About 2 billion people [already eat insects as part of their daily diet](#). But given that many people associate insects with dirt and disease, it's not guaranteed that bugs will make the cut as a major source of protein in the future.

But plant-based [meat substitutes](#) are surging in popularity in many developed countries. There is now a range of plant-based products that attempt to mimic the texture and taste of a variety of meats using ingredients such as soy or peas. The market share of these products has [grown significantly](#) in recent years—and the market is projected to [expand by 28% per year until 2030](#). Our recent study found that people who regularly work out and opt for high-protein diets are particularly interested in alternative sources that can deliver the same benefits as meat.

Despite this growth in plant-based substitutes, [meat consumption](#) is still predicted to [rise around the world](#). So alternatives are not enough—behavior has to change.

Nudge, nudge

Nudging people away from meat could include [changing the layout of places where food is bought or eaten](#), or designing menus so that

vegetarian options are given equal or greater prominence than meat dishes.

But the complexity of food choice means that these may not be as effective outside experiments. In the real world, what people choose to eat is driven by a whole host of factors including the smell or texture of food and cultural norms.

Nudges tend to work by targeting unconscious thoughts and behaviors. Many of our food choices [tend to rely on this](#), through [habit](#) or [convenience](#). You're more likely to pick the option you've tried before and enjoyed, or that you know is easy to prepare, without carefully thinking about it. People remain reluctant to buy [food](#) that their partners or children may reject. So attitudes to meat and plant-based substitutes still need addressing to alter eating behavior.

One area that shows particular promise is targeting people at specific stages in their lives. We found that older people would still want to eat foods which they had eaten as children. If children are given access to more plant-based proteins—and educated on their benefits for health and the environment—they might remain a valued component of their diet throughout their lives.

There are reasons to be optimistic that the [dietary changes](#) needed to limit global heating are achievable. Attitudes towards [meat](#) consumption are already changing, and there are plenty of options to try and encourage more people to pursue a diet that's better for them and the planet.

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