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## Young people's perception of the environmental impact of food and their willingness to eat less meat for the sake of the environment: a qualitative study

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The food system has a significant environmental impact, associated with high greenhouse gas emissions, land use, water use and loss of biodiversity<sup>(1)</sup>. Meat production is one of the largest contributors of environmental degradation in the food system and with global meat consumption increasing we are being encouraged to reduce intakes<sup>(2)</sup>. Meat, however, plays a central role in diets of many cultures<sup>(3)</sup> and it is unknown how salient this argument is with the public in terms of encouraging dietary change. The aim of this study was to explore young people's perceptions of the environmental impact of the food system and their willingness or openness to the idea of reducing meat consumption for the sake of the environment. In total 14 focus groups (n = 103) were conducted in 2013–14 with young people (aged 12–15 years) from five different schools in the North East of Scotland. Participating schools were in both urban and rural settings and spanned all socio-economic groups (derived from the percentage of free school meal entitlement). Data were generated and analysed thematically using Grounded Theory approaches. From the initial analysis the following three themes emerged:

- (1) **awareness of the environmental impact of food system**, which was commonly associated with excessive food packaging, the transportation of foods from other countries, environmental damage of littering, deforestation and factory pollution. Meat was rarely mentioned as a contributor, but when prompted some participants mentioned methane gas produced by cows and deforestation.
- (2) **resistance to the notion of reducing meat consumption for environmental benefits**, for a variety of reasons. Participants expressed concern that reducing meat intake may be detrimental to human health as a result in not getting enough nutrients, especially protein. They did not want to eat less meat due to the pleasure and central place meat represented in their daily diet. Other reasons included, not wanting to eat differently from family or friends, being concerned about the lack of palatable alternatives or they did not eat much meat anyway and there was no need to cut down.
- (3) **environmental concerns are a low priority in food selection decisions** with taste and enjoyment, price, desire for satiety and health properties the more salient issues.

Despite a lack of awareness of the link between meat and environmental impact, when given this information typically participants were still unwilling to consider reducing their meat consumption, prioritising other values over environmental concerns. If dietary changes to improve health and reduce environmental impacts are to be achieved, cultural, social and personal values around eating meat must be recognized and integrated into the scientific debate on sustainable diets.

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