

## Go Grass Fed Organic – AGA Certified

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✓ Fact Checked

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Grass fed meat and dairy are better for you – higher in certain vitamins, antioxidants and healthy fats – than meat and dairy from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs)
- › While CAFOs are top sources of air and water pollution, grass fed farming regenerates the soil and maintains ecological balance without relying on chemical fertilizers and pesticides
- › These basic elements of animal welfare are missing from CAFOs, while animals raised on pasture are afforded the freedom to express their natural behaviors; grass fed food is also less likely to be contaminated with drug-resistant bacteria
- › Look for the American Grassfed Association (AGA) logo on your meat and dairy, which ensures the highest quality grass fed products

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Choosing organic foods is a straightforward way to lower your exposure to pesticides and GMOs ([genetically modified organisms](#)), but an even better option is to look for foods, particularly meat and dairy, that are organic and grass fed.

Cows are designed to eat grass, but the majority of beef and dairy products in the U.S. come from cows that eat corn and grain, perpetuating the unethical, unhealthy and environmentally devastating concentrated animal feeding operations ([CAFOs](#)) that dominate industrial agriculture.

In exchange for cheap meat and dairy, we're paying a hefty price, one that may be infinite in the damage it's causing via pollution and damage to human health. On the other hand, farms producing grass fed meat and dairy products are able to naturally regenerate the soil and maintain ecological balance without relying on chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Meanwhile, grass fed products such as milk and cheese are valued for their seasonal variations in flavor, along with their superior nutritional profile. While the market is still small – labeled grass fed beef makes up just 1% of the U.S. beef market – it's growing fast. Sales of labeled grass fed beef reached \$272 million in 2016, up from \$17 million in 2012 – which means sales have doubled each year.<sup>1</sup>

## **Grass Fed Foods Are Better for You**

From a health standpoint alone, there's good reason to go organic and grass fed as much as possible. Milk from cows raised primarily on pasture has been shown to be higher in many nutrients, including vitamin E, beta-carotene and the healthy fats omega-3 and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA).<sup>2</sup> Grass fed beef is better for you too, with CLA levels increasing by two- to threefold when cattle are grass finished as opposed to grain finished.<sup>3</sup>

This is a significant benefit, as CLA is associated with a lower risk of cancer and heart disease and [optimized cholesterol levels](#). The ratio of dietary fats is also healthier in grass fed beef. According to Back to Grass: The Market Potential for U.S. Grassfed Beef, a report produced by a collaboration between sustainable agriculture and ecological farming firms:<sup>4</sup>

*"Although the exact physiologic mechanisms behind these benefits are not completely understood, grassfed beef (and dairy) can provide a steady dietary source of CLAs. The optimal ratio of dietary omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids is believed to be between 1-to-1 and 4-to-1.*

*Seven studies that compared the overall fat content of different beef types found that grassfed beef had an average ratio of 1.53, while grain-fed beef had a less healthy average ratio of 7.6."*

Grass fed meat is also higher in antioxidants like vitamins E and A, the report noted, along with the enzymes superoxide dismutase and catalase, which mop up free radicals that could otherwise hasten oxidation and spoilage.

Grain feeding cows also encourages the growth of E. coli in the animals' gut, as it leads to a more acidic environment. Grain-fed cows live in a state of chronic inflammation, which increases their risk of infection and disease, and necessitates low doses of antibiotics in feed for disease prevention purposes.<sup>5</sup>

This isn't the case with grass fed cattle, which stay naturally healthy as they're allowed access to pasture, sunshine and the outdoors. In a Consumer Reports study of 300 raw ground beef samples, grass fed beef raised without antibiotics was three times less likely to be contaminated with multidrug-resistant bacteria compared to conventional (CAFO) samples.<sup>6</sup>

The grass fed beef was also less likely to be contaminated with E. coli and Staphylococcus aureus than the CAFO meat. So while giving you more nutrition, you're also less likely to be exposed to drug-resistant pathogens when eating grass fed food.

## **Grass Fed Meat and Dairy Are Better for the Environment**

The CAFOs that produce most U.S. meat and dairy are among the top polluters on the planet, for myriad reasons. For starters, there's the massive amounts of manure that collect in CAFO "lagoons," leading to toxic air and water pollution, along with the excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides (not to mention water) used to grow the grains that the livestock eat.

U.S. CAFOs produce 500 million tons of manure annually, which is three times the amount of sewage produced by humans. This is far more manure than can be safely applied to farm fields in the U.S.<sup>7</sup> In a report released by environmental group Mighty

Earth, massive manure and fertilizer pollution churned out by meat giant Tyson Foods is blamed for causing the largest dead zone on record in the Gulf of Mexico, for instance.<sup>8</sup>

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the area of low oxygen, which can kill marine life, is nearly 9,000 square miles, which is about the size of New Jersey.<sup>9</sup> The dead zone is primarily the result of nutrient pollution from agriculture in the Mississippi River watershed. The excess nutrients promote the growth of algae that decomposes, using up oxygen needed to support life.

Mighty Earth singled out Tyson, and another meat giant Smithfield, as top contributors to the dead zone because they have the highest concentration of meat facilities in the areas with the highest levels of nitrate contamination.

In addition, Tyson's feed suppliers are responsible for the majority of grassland prairie clearance in the U.S., which "dramatically magnifies the impacts of fertilizer pollution."<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, as reported by Consumer Reports, the very act of feeding livestock grains is also problematic:<sup>11</sup>

*"Turning grain into meat is an inefficient process: It takes 7 kilograms of grain to produce 1 kilogram of beef. As a result, the conventional beef industry consumes vast amounts of corn and soybeans.*

*Those crops require significant amounts of water: It takes about 1,000 tons of water to grow 1 ton of feed. In addition, nonorganic farms use synthetic pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, and genetically engineered seed to grow the feed crops, which raises a variety of sustainability concerns."*

In contrast, raising animals on pasture using rotational or regenerative grazing approaches can increase soil organic matter, soil fertility and water-holding capacity, while naturally reducing erosion and encouraging crop diversity. Unfortunately, as farmers increasingly plant mostly wheat, rice, soy and corn (including for animal feed), more than 75% of crop genetic diversity has disappeared since the 1900s, leaving fields increasingly vulnerable to pests, disease and drought.<sup>12</sup>

## Grass Fed Is More Humane, Tastes Better

To be considered humane, animals should be raised without pain, injury or disease, as well as fear or distress. They should be given proper food and water as well as the ability to express normal behavior. These basic elements of animal welfare are missing from CAFOs, which keep animals confined for long periods of time without adequate space or access to the outdoors. As noted by the "Back to Grass" report:<sup>13</sup>

*"Standing on dirt (or sometimes concrete) flooring, often covered with thick layers of mud and manure, can produce health issues such as foot rot (causing swelling and lameness) and digital dermatitis, a bacterial infection that can also lead to lameness and intense discomfort.*

*In feedlots, antibiotics are used to prevent outbreaks of diseases, which spread easily from animal to animal when livestock are confined in the same area over a long period of time.*

*Antibiotics are also used in feedlots to prevent acidosis (a spectrum of conditions that arise when the microbes in the rumen ferment the starches in grain feed), which can produce harmful effects ranging from stomach bloat to sudden death."*

Animals raised on pasture are healthier, which means they're not routinely fed antibiotics, and are allowed to live out their lives as cows should, grazing and feeling the sun on their backs. It's important to understand, however, that choosing organic doesn't necessarily mean the animals were raised more humanely. Cows produce more milk, faster, when they're fed grain in the barn, as opposed to grazing on grass on pasture.

Industrialized organic dairies are capitalizing on this by skimping on grazing time, raising thousands of cows in veritable CAFOs, yet still gaining the USDA organic label that suggests otherwise.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is not doing nearly enough to protect the integrity of its organic label, which is why I encourage you to look for The

American Grassfed Association (AGA) logo, a much-needed grass fed standards and certification for American-grown grass fed meat and dairy.<sup>14</sup>

The standard allows for greater transparency and conformity<sup>15</sup> and is intended to ensure the humane treatment of animals and meet consumer expectations about grass fed dairy, while being feasible for small farmers to achieve.

An AGA logo on a product lets you know the animals were fed a lifetime diet of 100% forage, were raised on pasture (not in confinement) and were not treated with hormones or antibiotics.<sup>16</sup> I strongly encourage you to seek out AGA-certified meat dairy products as they become available. In the Midwest, the Kalona SuperNatural brand was the first dairy brand to become AGA-certified.

Grass fed foods are healthier for you and the planet, and better for the environment, but there's yet another reason to seek them out: their taste. "There is a growing consensus among chefs and gastronomical experts that high-quality grass fed beef not only rivals but is in fact better-tasting than grain-fed beef. It has a 'beefier' and more complex taste," Back to Grass pointed out.<sup>17</sup>

## **Returning to Grasslands Is Key**

Yet another reason to "go grass fed" is that regenerative agriculture, including converting cornfields back to grasslands and saving natural grasslands that exist, is key to fixing many environmental problems. This type of land management system promotes the reduction of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) by sequestering it back into the soil where it can do a lot of good. Once in the earth, the CO<sub>2</sub> can be safely stored for hundreds of years and actually adds to the soil's fertility.

Unfortunately, since the early 1800s, grasslands in North America have decreased by 79% – and in some areas by 99.9%.<sup>18</sup> This expansion of cropland at the expense of grasslands is tragic, as grasslands are biologically productive and support a wide variety of plant and animal life.<sup>19</sup> As Undark explained:<sup>20</sup>

*"Perhaps paradoxically, the expansion of cropland 'may actually be undermining the very agricultural productivity it seeks to gain,' write the authors of ... [an] Environmental Review Letters study.*

*Compared to cropland, grasslands 'harbor significantly greater plant, microbial, and animal diversity, and generate higher levels of nearly all agriculturally vital ecosystem services, including pest suppression and pollination.' To break prairie, then, is to dismantle the very supply chain that underpins American agricultural abundance."*

Imports of grass fed beef, which make up 75% to 80% of U.S. grass fed beef sales by value, are another hurdle. Australia and Brazil can produce grass fed beef at a lower cost, as their climate allows for year-round grazing. U.S. consumers may not know the grass fed beef they purchase isn't from the U.S., however, because as long as a piece of imported beef passes through a USDA-inspected plant, it can be labeled as a "Product of the USA."

As the Back to Grass report put it, accurate labeling is imperative to "ensure that consumers are getting what they think they're buying."<sup>21</sup> Not only may you be buying imported beef without knowing it, the grass fed beef you're buying may not be as wholesome as you expect it to be, thanks to weak standards.

This is another reason why looking for the AGA logo on your meat and dairy is important, as it ensures the animals were born and raised on American family farms, fed only grass and forage from weaning until harvest, and raised on pasture without confinement to feedlots.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps you can't do anything about how large-scale industrial farms continue to plow up valuable grasslands, but you can make a difference for yourself, your family and community that might have residual effects. Buying grass fed or pastured animal products, including beef, bison, chicken, milk and eggs, is an excellent start to support both your health and regenerative farming methods that are protecting, not polluting, the planet.

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1, 3, 4, 5, 13, 17, 21</sup> [Back to Grass: The Market Potential for U.S. Grassfed Beef October 2017](#)
- <sup>2</sup> [La Crosse Tribune December 19, 2013](#)
- <sup>6, 11</sup> [Consumer Reports October 2015](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production. 2006](#)
- <sup>8, 10</sup> [Mighty Earth, Heartland Destruction](#)
- <sup>9</sup> [NOAA August 2, 2017](#)
- <sup>12</sup> [BioGraphic](#)
- <sup>14</sup> [American Grassfed December 21, 2016](#)
- <sup>15</sup> [Civil Eats January 4, 2017](#)
- <sup>16</sup> [American Grassfed, Become an Approved AGA Producer](#)
- <sup>18, 20</sup> [Undark April 26, 2017](#)
- <sup>19</sup> [U.S. Geological Survey, Status and Trends of the Nation's Biological Resources, Volume 2](#)
- <sup>22</sup> [American Grassfed Association, Our Standards](#)