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Heart, Hope, Healing

Pasture-Raised Meat: Healthy, Safe, and Sustainable

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | DECEMBER 2, 2017



Benefitting from the nutrition of healthy, pasture-raised meat is part of our genetic legacy. There are key nutrients that we can *only* get from consuming animal-derived food. But how do we do it safely? Without cruelty? In a way that's safe and sustainable for our environment?

There are some who advocate not eating meat at all, not distinguishing pasture-raised meat from its less healthy commercial counterparts. They cite the scientific studies that suggest meat eaters are less healthy.

Here's the problem in that for me: commercially raised meat—I'm talking about the crowded industrial farms we've all heard the horror stories about—*is not at all the same* as pasture-raised meat, derived from animals raised in their natural environments. The latter—pasture-raised meat from animals allowed to roam freely and forage—are healthier, more nutrient-

rich, do not need antibiotics for growth, have less exposure to toxic herbicides, and have a much more favorable impact on the environment.

Cows roaming expansive pastures to forage on grasses and natural plants grow into completely different animals as a result of their diets and free movement throughout the day. Industrial feed lot cows move very little and consume large quantities of corn to fatten them. They become obese and metabolically sick, just like humans who consume similar high carbohydrate, processed food diets.

Likewise, pasture-raised, slow growing chickens and turkeys of heritage varieties, consume grasses, insects, and seeds. And they move all day. They are far superior to industrially-raised chickens, severely weakened and nutritionally depleted by their confinement and grain-based diets.

On the whole, pasture-raised animals are vastly and strikingly different from their commercial counterparts on the basis of their more nutrient-dense diets and active lifestyles. These differences support healthier physiologies that are passed on to us as greater intrinsic nutritional value and less exposure to problematic chemicals, like herbicides and antibiotics.

The current science on meat eating and health outcomes fails us by not taking note of these important differences. Yet we have archaeological and anthropological evidence that both modern and former hunter-gatherer cultures, whose diets consisted of plants and wild animals, were healthier than we are. While many attributes of their lifestyles influence this profile of better health, their diets played a key role.

Nutritional Profile of Pasture-Raised Meat: Beef

Grass-fed beef consumption is better for you than commercial, grain-finished beef because of its superior nutrient profile. The superior diets of pasture-raised cows leading to important distinctions in their composition and health. There are higher levels of key nutrients in the grasses and plants they consume, less exposure to antibiotics (needed to treat common infections in commercial cattle), and less ingestion of toxic pesticides and herbicides (found in higher levels in feed corn).

We are what we eat, therefore we are what *they* eat.

- **Protein:** Four ounces of grass-fed beef contains approximately 26 grams of protein. This includes the full complement of essential amino acids we need. One four ounce serving will take care of about a third of the average person's daily protein requirements.
- **Fat:** Grass-fed beef has a healthier fat profile compared to commercial feed lot beef. There are more healthy omega-3 fats—up to 2.5 grams per four ounce serving—in the form of alpha linolenic acid (ALA), EPA, and DHA. In addition, there are 2-3 times the amount of healthy omega-6 fats—conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). Both Omega-3 fats and

CLA have important anti-inflammatory and hormone modulating benefits in humans. There is 22-39% less cholesterol and a marked increase in several key fat soluble vitamins.

- **Antioxidants:** Grass-fed beef contains twice the amount of carotenoids (beta-carotene and lutein), and three times the vitamin E than their corn-fed compatriots. There also higher levels of the master antioxidant, Glutathione. The highest levels of antioxidants are found within beef liver—including vitamin A, carotenoids, Glutathione, vitamin C, and Selenium.
- **Micronutrients:** The quantities of a variety of vitamins and minerals are higher in grass-fed versus feed lot beef. These include vitamin B12, niacin, B6, selenium, zinc, potassium, phosphorus, iron, and potassium. Again, these will be found in higher concentrations within the liver.

Nutritional Profile of Pasture-Raised Meat: Chicken and Eggs

Like pasture-raised beef, we benefit from the healthier fats and nutrients these animals derive from their more natural and varied diets. Compared to commercial chickens, pasture-raised varieties are higher in healthy omega-3 fats, monounsaturated fats, and the fat-soluble antioxidant, vitamin E. They are excellent protein sources, with 35 grams of high quality protein in just 4 ounces, and rich in niacin, selenium, vitamin B6, phosphorus, choline, pantothenic acid, and vitamin B12.

A hen's natural diet increases the omega-3 fat content of her eggs and boosts the the vitamin E content by about 200% compared to caged hens. The yolks from pasture-raised chickens are rich sources of other fat-soluble nutrients like vitamins A, D, E, K, and carotenoids.

Make Peace With Eating Liver From Pasture-Raised Meat: Beef and Chicken

Including the liver of pasture-raised meat amplifies the nutritional benefits you receive from eating meat.

At least half of my clients turn their noses up at the mere mention of eating liver. And at least half of those have never even tried it! There is clearly an interesting innate disgust about it and yet many of our ancestral and indigenous cultures consumed them as central parts of their diets, with great benefit.

The liver is an important detoxification organ. Because detoxification is such an energy and nutrient expensive process, the liver is packed with many important nutrients—more so than other parts of the animals we consume. It is often mistakenly assumed that because the liver

processes toxins, it is more toxic for us to eat. This is not true because while toxins go through stages of biotransformation within the liver, they are quickly moved along for removal from the body, and thus not stored in the liver.

My Favorite Liver Recipe

I'm a simple girl when it comes to liver preparation. I use this recipe for both grass-fed beef and pasture-raised chicken livers.

You'll need: a heavy cast iron skillet, about 1/2 cup fresh pressed olive oil or coconut oil, 1 pound of liver cut into one-to-two inch pieces, salt and pepper to taste.

Saute liver pieces in oil over medium heat until barely pink in the middle. This will take about five minutes per side. When done, remove the liver pieces and drop in several handfuls of greens of your choice (I like spinach, kale, arugula, or a combination) and stir until well-coated in the savory oil and wilted. This will take just a minute or two.

Pasture-Raised Meat: Cruelty and Sustainability

It has been my experience that farmers who care about raising nutritionally superior animals also practice a kind approach to animal husbandry and reverent care of the land.

Indigenous cultures, living off the bounty of the natural world, show their respect for the benefit they derive from the plants and animals that sustain them. This includes ritualized blessings—giving thanks—to the animals sacrificed for this purpose.

Many modern farmers likewise practice respectful humane methods for all aspects of the life cycles of the animals they raise. Enrichment of the land through animal and crop rotation methods is a growing practice within the sustainable farming communities.

How to Find Pasture-Raised Meat and Eggs From Sustainable, Cruelty-Free Farms

Get to know your local farmers. Go visit them and ask them about their farming practices.

If you are lucky enough to have a local natural foods grocery or cooperative, as I am, speak to them. They will likely have vetted all of their vendors.

There are also companies who will ship pasture-raised meat right to your door. My family receives a monthly shipment from [Butcher Box](#), a mail order company offering humanely raised, affordable, 100% pasture-raised meat. In addition to meeting our requirements for nutritional quality and excellent farming practices, they've introduced us to cuts of meat we hadn't tried before, and send recipes for new preparation methods that have been excellent.

Resources:

Karyn Shanks, MD. [Healing Foods: My Favorite Healthy Fats](#). 2016.

Karyn Shanks, MD. [Protein: How Much Do We Need to Support Optimal Health?](#) 2016.

Karyn Shanks, MD. [Nutritional Ketosis: Heal and Protect Your Brain](#). 2017.

Cynthia A Daley, et al. [A review of fatty acid profiles and antioxidant content in grass-fed and grain-fed beef](#). Nutr J. 2010; 9:10.

The Weston A. Price Foundation. [The Liver Files](#). 2005.

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Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

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