

# Which Foods Have the Biggest Carbon Impact?

Plus, learn if there are ways you can reduce your carbon footprint through the foods you eat.

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We exchanged those plastic supermarket bags for reusable totes years ago; we're working on using less plastic in our kitchens and reducing our food waste. We've even tried to eat more plants, but as the climate crisis intensifies, we know there's more we can do. Food production is a significant contributor to climate change, and food accounts for anywhere from 10 to 30 percent of a household's carbon footprint. Yet, not all food is created equal.

"It's so great that people are looking to make more responsible choices at the supermarket, but greenwashing has made it increasingly difficult to do so," says

Kate Bratskeir, the author of *A Pocket Guide to Sustainable Food Shopping: How to Navigate the Grocery Store, Read Labels, and Help Save the Planet* (\$14.89, [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)). "Shoppers should look at products with a critical eye and get familiar with a few brands they can trust, so not every trip to the store has to feel like a close reading assignment." Here, we're taking a look at the foods with the biggest carbon footprint (or foodprint) and learning how we can reduce our household's carbon footprint through our food choices.

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## What Foods Have the Biggest Carbon Impact?

It probably doesn't come as a shock that meat and dairy have the most significant carbon impact, yet you may be surprised just how big of a carbon footprint that comforting [cheeseburger](#) has. "For most Americans, reducing meat and dairy consumption is the most impactful single dietary change you can make to reduce the carbon footprint of your food. You can cut your greenhouse gas emissions in half by removing meat products from your diet," says Galen Karlan-Mason, the CEO and founder of [GreenChoice](#), an app that helps consumers buy the best food products for their health and the planet. Their database includes carbon footprints for more than 100,000 food and beverage products.

Of course, not all meat and dairy is [unsustainable](#). Conventional beef is the least environmentally-friendly meat both in terms of the land it requires and the greenhouse gases it produces. After meat and dairy, several other food categories have large carbon footprints, including frozen meals, highly-processed snacks, and ready-to-eat pantry items. According to Karlan-Mason, the energy required to manufacture ultra-processed foods is much higher than raw or minimally processed food choices. And finally, almost anything that includes palm oil is almost always going to have a high carbon footprint. "Palm oil is extremely efficient, producing 4 to 10 times more oil per land than any other similar vegetable crop, nonetheless, when grown using conventional methods it is also responsible for massive deforestation, habit loss, and greenhouse gas," explains Karlan-Mason

## How Can You Reduce Your Carbon Footprint?

It's simple: Eat plants. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has reported that if more people switched to a plant-based diet, it could reduce greenhouse gases. Austin Whitman, CEO of Climate Neutral, a nonprofit behind the Climate Neutral Certified Label that is trying to enable people to shop with the climate in mind in the same way they would choose USDA Organic, walked us through typical eater's choices. "If you think of carbon emissions as tied to animals think 'did an animal die'? That's the worst. Followed by 'was an animal used in the making of the product' or 'was an animal an innocent bystander'? Not everyone can be a vegetarian but even giving up a little bit of meat can make a big difference," Whitman says.

Both GreenChoice and ClimateNeutral try to give consumers an easy way to shop a few trusted brands, as Bratskeir suggests. But as labels can be confusing, your best option when at the store is to look for plant-based products, items with few ingredients, and limiting your purchase of products containing soy and corn. "When shopping, look for products with RSPO certified palm oil (a sustainable palm oil certification by The Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil), and if you can't find any, opt for products without palm oil," says Karlan-Mason.

And when you do want meat to focus on local producers, which reduces the amount of travel the meat traveled and also allows for more transparency over where the meat came from and how the animals were treated.

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