# Why Is Grass Fed Lamb Better For Us?

It is frequently stated that 100% grass fed is *better for us, better for the animal, and better for the environment*. But why?

In general, when “experts” express the health issues of eating meat they are referring to grain-fed ruminants, not grass fed. The research suggests that the health problems associated with eating meat are real problems with the meat from ruminants (e.g., cattle, sheep, goats) fed grain concentrates. Even a small amount of grain in the diet destroys the benefits of grass according to a **USDA and Clemson University 2009 study**.

Scientists who compared grass fed lamb meat with grain fed lamb meat in a feedlot found that “*lambs grazing in pasture had 14% less fat and about 8 % more protein compared to grain-fed lamb*.” Grass fed lamb meat is also an excellent source of vitamin B-12, niacin, zinc, and a good source of iron. While other red meats, such as goat meat, offer those nutrients as well, grass fed lamb meat stands out with a comparatively high nutritional benefit. Grass fed lamb meat has one of the highest levels of **conjugated linoleic acid (CLA)** and omega-3 fatty acids, both heart-healthy fatty acids with anti-cancer, anti-diabetes, anti-fat properties.

## Why is grass fed better for the animal?

Ruminants were designed to eat forage. Forage (e.g., grass. pasture, range, browse, and hay) is the most natural diet for goats and sheep. Some of the reasons grains and other concentrates (e.g., corn, soy, byproducts) are added to ruminant diets is because these ingredients are inexpensive and convenient to use and result in fast growth. But a high grain and concentrate diet is difficult on the ruminant’s digestive system and often causes upsets or metabolic disorders.

## Humans eat grains. Why shouldn’t ruminants?

The difference between a ruminant (e.g., cattle, sheep, goats, deer) and non-ruminant (e.g., swine, poultry, predator animals) is the digestion system. Ruminants have a 4 part stomach with the unique ability to break down cellulose such as grass and browse into digestible forms. This is a 2-3 day process and requires rumination or chewing of the cud and helpful microbes and enzymes. It is these microbes and enzymes that break down cellulose into a digestible form. It is also the reason ruminants can derive nutrients from a wide variety of forages and we can’t.

When ruminants are “fattened” on a high concentrate diet, instead of forages, the environment in the digestive system changes. Grains are digested more rapidly than the cellulose in forage. More food can be eaten in a shorter period of time. Faster growth occurs and the extra energy is stored as fat. But this high energy process can cause problems. The microbes that digest grains differ from those that digest forage and are killed off. The stomach becomes more acidic frequently causing acidosis. Symptoms of acidosis include diarrhea, ulcers, bloat, liver disease and a general weakening of the immune system. Acidotic animals go off their feed, pant, salivate excessively and may even die.

Supplemental and controlled feeding of concentrates can be helpful during times when the forage options are limited (e.g. drought) or when there is a high nutrition need (e.g.

lactation). Many farmers supplement with grains to ensure steady and healthy growth of young stock when quality pasture is limited. Managing of available resources and balancing diet for optimal health and growth may mean *grass fed* is not the best option for some meat producers or for their livestock. Ruminant diets can be carefully balanced to ensure health is maintained while utilizing the benefits of both forage and concentrates. BUT feedlot practices of confinement, crowding, and nearly 100% concentrate fed is not healthy for any of us—and this is the majority of the meat available in corporate food stores.

**Check the label.** "*Natural,*" counter to what many people assume, does not mean grass fed or antibiotic-free. Both antibiotics and hormones are used to help animals to grow faster and to increase profits. Most grass-fed products have no antibiotics, hormones or animal by-products, but this may not be true in all cases. If this is important to you be certain to confirm. Livestock raised or finished in confined areas require antibiotics added to the grain concentrate. Sometimes this is because of illness, but mainly antibiotics are used to prevent the spread of disease caused by overcrowding and poor sanitation.

## Why is grass fed better for the environment?

Sustainable agriculture practices long term resource management. Plants and animals are crucial to sustainable agriculture but the wrong combination or density can have a devastating effect on the environment. Some of the damages caused by intense farming are erosion, structural changes, hydrology, and compaction. Certain farming practices such as deforestation, ploughing up or burning off grasslands and clearing hedgerows to quicken this damage. This means decisions on diversifying crops, maintaining and improving soil, and controlled grazing of forages are critical. Sustainable production is not a one-plan-for-all but instead, a way of life that requires an individualized vision, plan and implementation steps specific to each farm.

In the past, land was managed to achieve maximum economic productivity. This is increasingly changing to an emphasis on caring and improving the biodiversity of the soil, plant, water and animal habitat. Sustainable management depends a great deal on understanding the biological processes involved in soil and plant health. Research has shown that the inclusion of grazing animals in sustainability plans helps to limit or repair soil and plant degradation due to intense farming systems. This is counter to some of the past believes that grazing is harmful or that eating meat is harmful to the environment.

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