

Is pork good for you? It's complicated



How does pork fit into a healthy diet? For the answer, more than reading between the lines, you need to read between the slogans.

On one side there is “Eat More Bacon,” a cheer embraced by those rebelling against mainstream health advice who have either bought into an alternative all-you-can-eat approach to saturated fat or who want to snub wellness culture altogether. Emblazoned on T-shirts, throw pillows, bumper stickers and coffee mugs, the phrase has become more than a saying — it is a way of life.

On the other side, there is “The Other White Meat,” one of the most memorable taglines in modern advertising, which, according to the National Pork Board’s website, was designed to “dispel pork’s reputation as a fatty protein” and promote it as lean, versatile and nutritious.

Both slogans compel you to put more pig on your plate, but depending on how you do it, that may or may not be a good idea.

Pork has more going for it nutritionally than you may realise. It is a powerhouse of essential

vitamins and minerals — just three ounces of cooked lean pork covers you for more than a third of the daily requirement for thiamin, niacin, selenium and vitamin B6. Plus it is rich in vitamin B12, potassium, iron, magnesium and zinc. That palm-size amount of meat also gives you 22 grams of high-quality protein. Although I object to today's inescapable trend that equates the word "protein" with "healthy," there is no doubt that it is critical to get enough of the nutrient.

Research suggests that there are benefits, especially in maintaining muscle mass for those trying to lose weight and for older adults, to getting at least 1 gram of protein per kilogram of body weight per day, somewhat more than the official Recommended Daily Intake. (That translates to 0.45 grams per pound, which comes to 68 grams a day for a 150-pound person.) Although most adults, especially men, already exceed that higher number, about 8 percent of teenage girls and elderly people do not meet even their basic protein requirements. A nice pork chop could help.

Notice I specified "lean" when lauding the meat's nutritional benefits — that's because the leaner the cut, the more concentrated its healthy properties. As you get into fattier cuts and cured pork products like bacon and sausage, you dilute the benefits while piling on the calories, saturated fat and sodium. For comparison, consider the leanest cut of pork, the tenderloin, which is as lean as a skinless chicken breast. It has just 120 calories, 1 gram of saturated fat and 50 mg of sodium in three cooked ounces. The same amount of bacon has 466 calories, 12 grams of saturated fat and 1870 mg of sodium — more than half a day's worth of saturated fat and salt. Tenderloin and bacon come from a pig, but nutritionally speaking, they are two different animals.

In other words, "Eat More Bacon" may be fun on a retro-looking sign in your kitchen, but it's not a healthy eating strategy. Go ahead and embrace fat — you have my blessing on that — but the scientific evidence, and even the fine print in the work of some of the most ardent fatvocates, points to the fats from healthy oils, nuts, seeds and fish as the ones to focus on. The message was loud and clear in the presidential advisory from the American Heart Association published in the journal *Circulation* last month: "We conclude strongly that lowering intake of saturated fat and replacing it with unsaturated fats, especially polyunsaturated fats, will lower the incidence of [cardiovascular disease]."

There are several pork cuts that are very low in saturated fat — seven cuts meet the Agriculture Department's definition for lean or extra lean — and they generally have the word "loin" in their name. But a whole pig only has so much loin. If we were all eating just lean cuts, what would happen to the rest of the pig — the hock, the shoulder, the belly and more?

My solution (if you want to eat pork at all) is to veer away from the bacon gorgers and white-meat pushers and enjoy a balanced and conscientious whole-hog approach. That means having an occasional meal in which pork tenderloin medallions or other lean cuts take centre stage, but also using fattier parts now and then, cooking them so you can render their fat out and/or using them as a flavouring element rather than a main course.

For example, if you cook some fatty pork shoulder a day before you plan to eat it, then chill the meat in the refrigerator overnight, skim off most of the fat the next day and you'll have lean and luscious pulled pork for sandwiches or tacos. You can use the same technique with pork stew, which you can also load up with beans and vegetables. Pork bones and meat make for a deeply flavorful stock that can also be skimmed of fat. And although fresh pork is healthier than salted and cured, you can still use small amounts of bacon or sausage to season a big batch of kale or collards or a pot of beans. If it sounds like something your grandma might have done, that's the idea.

Although pork can be a good choice, does that mean you should be eating more of it? For the answer, the critical question to ask yourself is "instead of what?" Many health-minded eaters who feel like they are going to start clucking if they eat more chicken are overjoyed at the good-for-you possibilities with pork. If you are getting out of a poultry rut by cooking a pork tenderloin, making a homemade pork stew instead of ordering pizza, or grilling marinated pork chops instead of your usual fatty beef ribeye, then you are on the right track. But although pork clearly has its pluses, most of us would benefit from getting more of our protein from plants (nuts, seeds and beans) and seafood.