A Less-Meat Diet: Healthy for us, healthy for the climate

Molly McGroary, B.S.
Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, Class of 2026

The food industry generates about one-third of all human produced greenhouse gas emissions. Given the essential nature of nutrition, it can feel like an unavoidable harm to the planet. However, not all foods are created equal. Beef accounts for nearly half of agriculture related greenhouse gas emissions, due to its extensive land and fertilizer use, as well as enteric methane production. By encouraging patients to focus on plant and poultry based diets, they can make decisions that are not only healthy for their families, but healthy for the planet.

- **Focus on progress, not perfection** - According to the USDA the average American eats 67 pounds of beef per year so for many patients, the suggestion to cut back on beef consumption will be easier said than done. It has been estimated that in order to avoid environmental harm, the average American should eat no more than 98 g of red meat per week, or about 15% of the average intake. Consider starting small, with this as the ultimate goal.

- **Replace beef with less resource intensive meats** - Although all meats are resource intensive, producing one kilogram of beef produces about 6 times more greenhouse gas emissions than one kilogram of poultry. Ground turkey or chicken can almost imperceptibly replace ground beef in a wide array of meals, from tacos to chili, and even burgers. Beef hot dogs can be swapped for pork, and beef sausage can be swapped for pork or chicken.

- **Consider "Meatless Mondays" (or "Beefless Monday")** - A classic example of cutting down without eliminating is the growing trend of "Meatless Mondays" - encouraging families to consider swapping just one dinner a week for a meatless (or even just beef-less, option). It has been estimated that serving a red meat and dairy free meal just one day per week reduces greenhouse gas emissions as much as eating a 100% locally sourced diet.

- **Get creative** - Meals with less red meat can be accomplished by playing with ingredients. Suggest adding bulk to meals with grains or vegetables, with a small amount of meat for flavor. In soups and chilis, you can try upping the ratio of beans to meat. This can also be done with tofu, in meals like stir fry. Cooking tofu with a small amount of meat can also give great flavor.

- **A changing landscape-** While estimates suggest that we do not need to stop eating beef entirely to halt climate change, there is a cultural shift towards plant based diets. As of 2021, about 5% of 8-17 year olds were vegetarian. Working closely with families to ensure adequate nutritional intake can support this planet-friendly choice while promoting healthy development.