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# THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED EFFORTS IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DIETS: LESSONS FROM A GRASSROOTS MEAT-REDUCTION CAMPAIGN

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## *Study outline*

The authors of this paper conducted a case study of a community-based approach to meat reduction at the household level and assessed effectiveness through three follow-up surveys. While there has been substantial research into individual and structural interventions to reduce meat consumption, less attention has been paid to social and community-level factors. This paper sought to track changes in households' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and food choices over a nine-month period.

As part of a 10-year grassroots climate action initiative, the Bedford 2020 Meatless Monday Campaign, in Westchester County, New York, recruited households to pledge to abstain from meat one day a week for 12 weeks while promoting the benefits of a plant-forward diet

## *Key findings*

Results of the follow-up surveys demonstrated that participation in a short-term pledge to reduce meat consumption at least once per week can result in long-term continuation of these habits. At baseline, the largest proportion of participants cited wanting to eat healthier as a key motivator for reducing meat. The 12-week and six-month surveys found that there was a significant increase in the percent of respondents citing saving energy and limiting fuel dependence as key motivators over time. There was also an increase

across the community. The campaign worked with a team of volunteers to engage community stakeholders, such as restaurants, businesses, schools, the town library, and the local hospital. Strategies used to promote dietary behavior change included priming with other environmental programs, communication with stakeholders, and sharing photos, recipes and feedback from participants on social media, in newsletters, and in the local press. Researchers conducted quantitative surveys at baseline, 12 weeks, and six months after the campaign to determine its effects on participants' attitudes and beliefs around meat reduction. They also conducted a series of focused interviews to gather additional insight into the experiences of volunteers and participants.

in the percent of those wanting to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and those citing concern for the environment, coinciding with a significant reduction in the percent of respondents citing eating healthier.

The majority of participants reported that they were more aware of the social and environmental benefits of reducing meat consumption at the two follow-up points, and at the six-month follow-up 56 percent of participants reported eating a lot or slightly less meat than before

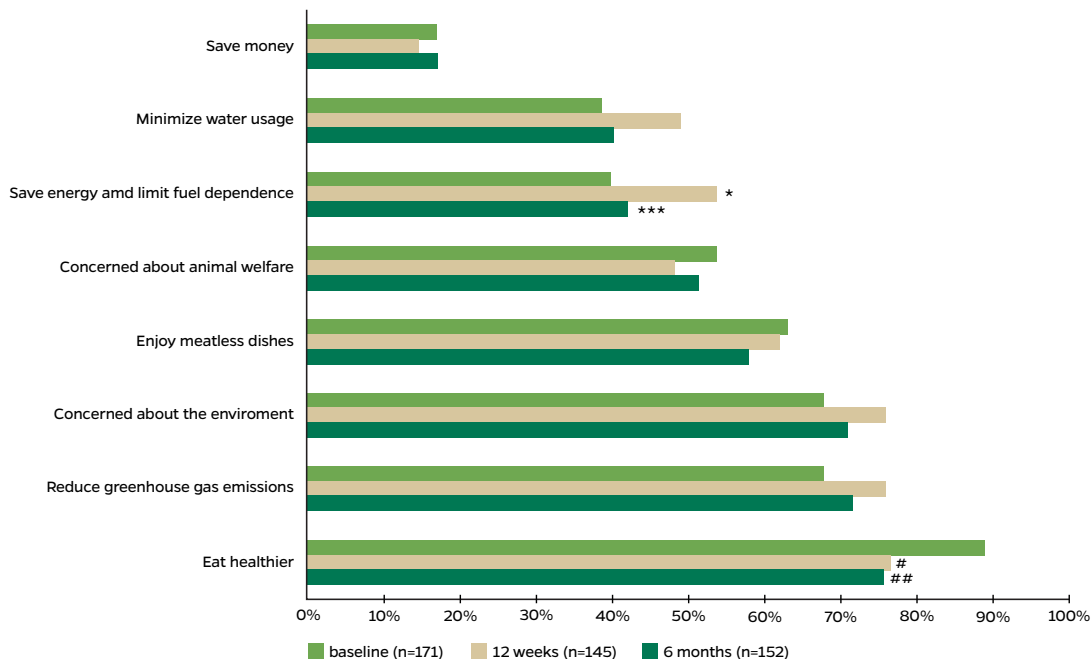


the campaign. Furthermore, 66 percent rated the task of reducing meat consumption at least one day a week as easy or very easy.

The majority of survey respondents were between 35 and 54 years old, female, Caucasian, and highly educated, with an annual income level above \$150,000. Many participants had been previously exposed to Meatless Monday or had an interest in eating less meat; thus, their familiarity with the subject area was likely greater than that of the general public. As a result, these findings may limit the generalizability to other populations. However, the findings do suggest that providing people with resources and opportunities to reduce their meat consumption – for example, by posting meatless recipes on social media or providing more meatless options in restau-

rants – can have long-lasting effects. Additionally, the findings support the assumption that social and community factors are important for initiating and maintaining dietary behavior change, as well as the efficacy of partnerships between volunteers and local stakeholders. Importantly, this campaign demonstrates that community engagement and grassroots efforts can result in sustained, widespread meat reduction beyond the period of the initial Meatless Monday pledge. While previous research has identified interventions for societal and individual factors influencing meat consumption, this study found that community-level interventions, targeting relationships between individuals and key community partners, can influence dietary behavior change as well.

### What made you cut back on your meat consumption?



\*denotes a significant difference (p<0.05) between baseline and 12 weeks  
 \*\*\* denotes a significant difference (p<0.05) between 12 weeks and 6 months  
 # denotes a significant difference (p<0.01) between baseline and 12 weeks  
 ## denotes a significant difference (p<0.01) between baseline and 6 months

## *Lessons learned for future initiatives*

- Future campaigns should make it as easy as possible for participants to reduce their meat consumption. Ideas include providing meatless recipes and promoting meatless options at restaurants.
- Educating participants on the types of foods they can eat instead of meat and how they can prepare meatless meals may result in sustained reduction of meat consumption over time.
- Campaigns should also emphasize both health and environmental impacts of reducing meat consumption, and that Meatless Monday is a simple, actionable way people can improve their own health and the health of the planet.
- Introducing participants to other sustainability programs before beginning a Meatless Monday campaign can leverage momentum for environmental behavior change and help generate interest in meat reduction.
- Campaigns should recruit community members as volunteers and engage stakeholders such as businesses, libraries, hospitals, schools, and media outlets to disseminate Meatless Monday promotional material and promote key messages.
- A challenge to overcome is the tastes and preferences of friends and family members—participants reported difficulty reducing meat consumption when family members were unwilling to give up meat. Difficulties may be alleviated by increasing the availability of plant-based foods at partner organizations and by disseminating tips, recipes and nutrition facts.
- The best time to implement food-related campaigns is during the spring or summer, when farmers markets are open and fruits and vegetables are more readily available.

Launched in 2003, Meatless Monday is a nonprofit initiative of **The Monday Campaigns**, working in collaboration with the Center for a Livable Future (CLF) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Meatless Monday's goal is to reduce meat consumption by 15 percent for our personal health and the health of the planet.