

EARTH DAY EVERY DAY

Tips for a Healthy, Low-Carbon Life



.Commuting by bike reduces global warming pollution and saves money.

Making greener choices, from the food you eat to the way you travel, can improve your health and well-being. A recent *British Medical Journal* article advises doctors that encouraging climate-friendly lifestyles “could be your most important contribution to your patients’ health.”

1. Use muscle power rather than gasoline when you can

Burning fossil fuels, such as gas in your car, emits heat-trapping pollution like carbon dioxide (CO₂) that contributes to global warming. Cutting down on driving and using your own two legs helps cut global warming pollution and helps eliminate weight problems over time without dangerous diets or surgery.

Commute by foot or bike. If all Americans used foot or pedal power instead of engine horsepower as our recommended daily exercise during normal travel, we could reduce our oil dependence by more than a third. Try walking or bicycling to work a few times a week and get a healthy dose of exercise on the way. (See the [benefits of bicycling to work](#).)

Combine errands when you have to drive. Encourage children to walk to school. Driving less also helps reduce emissions of pollutants that worsen heart and lung diseases.

Use a push mower. Transportation isn’t the only change you can make to fight climate change and live more healthfully. By using a push mower instead of a power mower to cut your lawn, you can also cut up to 80 pounds of CO₂ emissions per year! And you’ll get a great workout!

2. Skip the bottled water, carry tap

Drinking plenty of fluids is important during hot weather or when exercising. But is bottled water the way to go? You may not think so when you see the true costs. According to the [Pacific Institute’s fact sheet \[PDF\]](#), manufacturing the 30-plus billion plastic water bottles we bought in 2006:

- Required the equivalent of more than 17 million barrels of oil — enough to fuel more than one million vehicles for a year.
- Produced more than 2.5 million tons of carbon dioxide.
- Used three times the amount of water in the bottle.

Adding in transportation, the energy used comes to over 50 million barrels of oil equivalent — enough to run 3 million cars for a year. So skip the bottled water and drink tap water, both at home and at restaurants. Tap is cleaner and cheaper than most bottled water. Learn more about the [true costs of bottled water](#).

3. Choose foods thoughtfully

Americans have never had such a variety or abundance of food to choose from. On top of so many choices, we now hear about our "food print." Do we buy cherry tomatoes from Mexico or tomatoes grown locally in a hothouse? Do we get the Granny Smiths from the farmers' market or the supermarket? Is organic produce healthier for us and the planet?

These are very complex issues that require analysis of many criteria, including the energy used in producing and transporting the food, as well as the type of soil and methods of raising the food.

Despite the complexities, there are some general guidelines you can follow that are good for you and the planet.

Eat less meat (eat low on the food chain). Your doctor may have advised you to limit your consumption of red meat because of its unhealthy saturated fat content, particularly corn-fed animals. (Milk, meat and eggs from grass-fed animals are both lower in saturated fats and contain higher levels of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.)

There are environmental reasons, too. Raising food animals contributes substantially to climate change because a meat-based diet requires more land, energy and water than a plant-based one.

Health writer Michael Pollan sums up this principle best in his book [In Defense of Food](#): "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." ([Read an interview](#) with the author in a *New York Times* blog.) Eating less meat and more grains and vegetables helps reduce:

- **the need to convert forests or grasslands to pasturelands,**
- **the amount of corn grown for feed (which lessens the amount of fossil fuels used to grow the corn), and**
- **greenhouse gas emissions from manure** (see [Farm Animals and Methane](#)).

Buying local may be, but is not always, climate-friendly. We often hear about the benefits of eating locally grown fruits and vegetables, and there are many. They include:

- **Less transit, less oil (maybe).** The average American meal travels 1,500 miles from field to mouth — so locally grown foods often (but not always) use much less oil in transport than the foods that make up a conventional American meal. For example, if the state of Iowa shifted just 10 percent of fruits and vegetables from conventional to regional or local food systems, it would reduce CO₂ emissions by about 7 million pounds, according to the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.
- **Better tasting than produce shipped from afar.** Locally grown fruits and vegetables can be picked at peak ripeness and may be higher in nutrients. Spinach, for example, loses nutrients at certain temperatures and after several days in storage.

So buyer beware: Use common sense and ask lots of questions when purchasing items.

Things to watch for:

- **Energy-intensive local production** (such as tomatoes grown in a hothouse that requires energy for heating) may produce more global warming pollution than efficiently producing and shipping foods from farther away.
- **Differences in transportation methods**—by ship or plane, for example—can also cause greenhouse gas emissions to differ widely even when a food is transported the same distance (see [Food Miles: Is Local Always Better?](#)).

Choose less-processed foods. Heavily processed foods tend to be low in fiber and high in fat and sugar. They often contain lots of dyes, colorings, and preservatives that aren't great for your health. And all that processing uses a lot of energy.

Getting your food from field to table requires multiple steps, including processing the whole food into a refined product, which then may be used as an ingredient in another food product. Still more energy is needed to package and ship the final product to retailers.

More steps in processing generally means more intensive energy use. Take a bottle of ketchup. Tracking a common brand of ketchup sold in Sweden through the 50-plus steps to produce it revealed steep energy and environmental costs.

Avoid heavily packaged foods and buy in bulk. Processing and packaging together take nearly a quarter of the energy used in food production. Choose minimally packaged foods or those in the biggest containers available. Fresh fruits and vegetables, of course, are usually not packaged at all (shun those Styrofoam containers!), and they are healthy choices.

Buying organic has benefits, too. Whether growing organic food versus conventionally grown food produces less global warming pollution overall is hotly debated, and the jury is still out. How much the soil is tilled, how much greenhouse gas the soil retains or releases, what type of food is raised (fruits and vegetables, grains, milk or chickens) — these are some factors that must be considered. Still, there are clear pluses for your health and for the environment.

The health benefits of going organic include:

- Organic foods are **grown without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers** so you reduce your exposure to hazardous chemicals.
- Organic produce is often **richer in nutrients and antioxidants**, evidence suggests.

The ecological upsides of growing food organically include:

- **Less pollution.** Fertilizer and pesticide runoff pollutes rivers and streams and washes into bays and ocean, causing oxygen-starved dead zones where fish can't live.
- **Less energy consumed to produce chemicals.** A hefty chunk of energy goes into producing agricultural pesticides and fertilizers, by some estimates as much as 40 percent of the energy used in the food system.
- **More biodiversity.** Using natural methods to enrich the soil and control pests promotes more variety of organisms.

You also help spur demand for organic foods by buying them. This in turn prods farmers to grow food without harsh chemicals. All your food choices together can have a profound effect on your carbon footprint, as much as the type of car you drive.

<http://www.edf.org/page.cfm>