

UNDERSTANDING GRASS FED AND GRAIN FED BEEF

Grass fed and grain fed beef are terms that can be used to describe the beef you can buy. What do these terms mean and how do these feeding practices impact the nutritional quality of the beef you eat?

WHAT CATTLE EAT

All cattle eat forage for most of their lives by grazing out in pasture for summer months, or as feed when pasture is under snow in the winter. Forage includes grasses as well as legume plants such as clover and alfalfa. As feed, forage will be fed to cattle dried as hay or as silage, a naturally fermented feed. Some grain may also be provided during winter to ensure the cattle have sufficient energy for growth.

At about 3 to 4 months before cattle go to market, cattle feed may be gradually adjusted to a diet that consists mainly of grains like corn or barley. The grain helps to produce a more marbled higher quality grade of beef. At this time, cattle are housed in barns or fenced in areas for easier feeding. Beef from cattle finished on a grain based diet may be referred to as 'grain fed'. Beef from cattle that are not grain finished may be called 'grass fed'.

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NUTRITIONAL QUALITY

Grass fed beef is purchased by some, based on the perception that there is a difference in nutritional quality between grain finished and grass fed beef.

In a recent study¹ with regards to fat, grass fed beef appears to be leaner than grain finished beef by about 2 to 4 grams per 100 grams of trimmed meat. Dietitians typically agree that although statistically significant, in practical terms this difference is small in the context of the total fat consumed from the foods we eat daily. With regard to nutrients, the study showed that both grass fed and grain finished beef contribute some omega-3 fatty acids however, the contribution of omega-3 fatty acids in all beef is small in comparison to that from seafood. No differences were found in cholesterol levels in the majority of the studies examined, or in nutrients such as iron and zinc. There were some nutrient differences in Vitamin B, calcium and potassium but these differences were not meaningful on a total diet basis.

To sum up, all beef whether grass fed or grain finished (grain fed) contributes significant amount of nutrients and the differences between the two nutritionally are small.

1. Van Elswyk ME and McNeill SH. Impact of Grass/Forage Feeding versus Grain Finishing on Beef Nutrients and Sensory Quality: The U.S. Experience. Meat Sci 2014; 96(1):535-540.

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