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Where's the beef? Not here

The supply of U.S. beef is down and retail prices up -- but some say that's not why we're eating less meat.

Ground beef was a staple of my family's diet when I was growing up, and though I don't eat much red meat anymore, that's by choice rather than necessity. Unfortunately, with beef prices steadily rising, a lot of families may no longer have the luxury of choosing whether beef is what's for dinner.

Beef prices, which rose 10% in 2011, are expected to increase another 4% or 5% this year -- with some estimates projecting a 10% jump, according to [USA Today](#). The reasons are multiple, but supply is a big one -- down 2% from 2011 to a 60-year low of about 91 million head, according to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#). *Post continues below.*

The decline is due, in part, to last year's severe drought in Texas, Oklahoma and other states. Rising feed prices and competition are also to blame, USA Today reported:

The crisis added to a long-term trend of ranchers thinning their herds because of the soaring price of corn -- a primary feedstock for cattle -- rising property costs and increased competition for land with corn, soybeans and other crops, says Kevin Good, a senior analyst at research firm CattleFax.

Also impacting the supply of U.S. beef for Americans is increased demand for beef in Canada, Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong. Exports increased 22% in 2011.

All of which means higher prices at the grocery store for American consumers.

Americans eating less beef anyway

Rising prices might not be the only reason Americans are eating less beef. Nationwide, per-capita beef consumption is down 25% since 1980, [Reuters](#) reports.

According to the [USDA](#) (.pdf file), American meat and poultry consumption in 2012 will be 12.2% less than it was in 2007. The [Daily Livestock Report](#) (.pdf file) projects that Americans on average will consume the boneless equivalent of 165.5 pounds of meat and poultry this year.

"Beef consumption has been in decline for about 20 years; the drop in chicken is even more dramatic, over the last five years or so; pork also has been steadily slipping for about five years," wrote chef [Mark Bittman](#) on [The New York Times Opinionator blog](#). Consumers are making an active choice, he contends: "We're eating less meat because we *want* to eat less meat."

In May, the nonprofit [Meatless Monday](#) initiative announced that half of those surveyed were aware of its campaign, and that 27% said Meatless Monday had "influenced their decision to cut back on meat."

[The Values Institute at DGWB Advertising](#) included "the rise of the ['flexitarians'](#)" among its top five consumer health trends for 2012, [OC Metro](#) reported. The term, which blends "flexible" and "vegetarian," refers to people who reduce their meat consumption but don't give it up entirely.

Easy ways to eat less meat

Giving up beef -- or reducing how much you eat -- doesn't have to mean subsisting on lettuce, peanut butter and cheese.

Here are some suggestions for how to cut back your beef consumption:
Consider cutting meat out of your diet one or two days a week.

Americans eat more meat than people in other countries, so find inspiration in foods such as pizza, Asian noodle dishes and other recipes that include some meat but don't focus on it.

Use meat for flavor -- think [green beans with bacon](#).

Decrease the size of your meat portions. Instead of a 12-ounce steak, order one that is 8 ounces or smaller.

Look up [flexitarian recipes](#) (or [vegetarian recipes](#)) online and experiment to find ones that work for your family.

Use half as much meat in recipes such as chili, tacos or pasta sauce, and make up the difference with protein-rich black or white beans.

If proponents of the almost-vegetarian lifestyle are to be believed, the benefits may extend from your wallet to your waistline -- and beyond.

"Flexitarians weigh 15% less, have a lower rate of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer and live 3.6 years longer than their carnivorous counterparts," says [Dawn Jackson Blatner](#), author of "[The Flexitarian Diet](#)."