

Nutrition and Young People

Growing up means big changes, not just socially and emotionally, but physically too. From children to teens and into adulthood, young people's bodies and brains are going through rapid development. This means they need the right nutrients in the right amounts for optimal health and wellbeing.

Nutrient Essentials

Children, teenagers and young adults need specific nutrients to fuel growth spurts, build strong bones, and develop healthy muscles and brains. **Iron** is vital for energy, immunity and concentration, especially in girls who need to make up for iron losses during their periods.



Young people can enjoy red meat as part of a healthy, balanced diet.

Calcium and **vitamin D** help strengthen bones, while **zinc** supports skin, the immune system, and (for boys) reproductive health. High-quality red meat **protein**, such as lean cuts of Scotch Beef, Scotch Lamb and Specially Selected Pork are a rich and bioavailable source of key nutrients, fuelling muscle, supporting bone growth and optimising health.

But when life gets busy - with school, friends, clubs, social media, or work - nutrition often slips down the list. Grabbing food on the go, skipping breakfast, relying on a quick boost from sugary drinks, and choosing snacks or takeaways over balanced meals can mean missing out on essential vitamins and minerals.

Nutrition 'chatter' in the media and on social media can also influence young people's food choices, encouraging them to diet, 'go vegan' or cut out specific food groups. So, what impact does this have on the healthiness of young people's diets?

Red Meat and Health

A serving of beef, lamb or pork provides a wide range of essential nutrients to fuel growth, exercise and brain development. Depending on the cut, this includes:

- **Potassium** for normal muscle function
- **Phosphorus** for normal bone health
- **Iron** for normal cognitive function
- **Zinc** for normal immune function
- **Selenium** for normal reproductive health
- **Riboflavin** for normal vision
- **Niacin** for normal energy release
- **Vitamin B12** for helping to reduce tiredness and fatigue

Eating red meat **four or five** times a week, with a portion of around **100g** (4oz, cooked weight), is recommended as part of a balanced diet.

Go for lean cuts and serve with a double portion of vegetables, beans or pulses to boost fibre levels.

A New Scottish Study

A study from Food Standards Scotland and the University of Edinburgh* showed the importance of red meat such as beef, pork and lamb in the diets of Scotland's children and young people.

It looked at nutrient intakes in 1,700 Scottish 2–15-year-olds and then modelled what could happen if meat and dairy intakes were reduced. The suggested reductions came from a report by the UK Climate Change Committee which proposed cutting meat by 20–35% and cutting dairy foods by 20%. More than nine in ten of the young people surveyed enjoyed meat in their diets. The research showed that meat provided a quarter of selenium and a fifth of zinc intake, both minerals which support normal immunity.

The health benefits are only magnified when teenagers are considered, given the research shows this group is already at risk of low intakes of several micronutrients readily available in red meat. When meat and dairy foods were cut down, intakes of several nutrients fell significantly putting young people at risk of deficiency. The risk of zinc deficiency increased the most by up to 35%. Iodine, iron, calcium, selenium and vitamin B12 were also affected. These are all vital nutrients for normal growth and development. The report also highlights that meat replacements could mitigate some, but not all, of the negative impacts of cutting red meat on nutrient intake.



Scottish youth swimmer Lili Mundell uses red meat to fuel her athletic performance.

The report concluded that making blanket reductions to meat and dairy intakes was not a good thing for young people's nutrient intakes.

Links/Further Information

- For more information on celebrating the positives of red meat, read our toolkit, [here](#).
- Explore how eating red meat can help to fuel performance and recovery in sport, [here](#).

* To explore the full report from Food Standards Scotland – click [here](#).