



Public perspectives

Plant-based meat and the UK's ultra-processed food debate

New qualitative research provides insights into how the ongoing UPF debate is shaping food choices and attitudes towards plant-based meat.

Plant-based meat has the potential to help the UK reduce its consumption of red and processed meat and build a healthier, sustainable and resilient food system.

Despite more than half of UK adults wanting to eat less meat and/or more plant-based foods, sales of plant-based meat have fallen since 2021.

Some commentators have linked ongoing concerns about ultra-processed foods to this decline, but so far there is limited evidence on how the UPF debate shapes people's attitudes towards the category. This report begins to address that gap.

Key findings

- ▶ Participants saw plant-based meat as processed – but this was not the only lens through which they judged it.
- ▶ Those who already distrusted plant-based meat used UPF as another reason to avoid it.
- ▶ Those who ate plant-based meat felt it positively supported their lifestyle and food preferences, despite recognising it as being processed.
- ▶ Participants viewed plant-based meat as occupying a middle ground – healthier than processed meat but less healthy than beans, chickpeas and vegetables.
- ▶ The appeal of different options varied by person and lifestyle. Some valued the convenience of swapping their sausages, nuggets and burgers for plant-based options. Others, who preferred the idea of reducing meat consumption by cooking from scratch, were not persuaded by the convenience offered by plant-based meat.

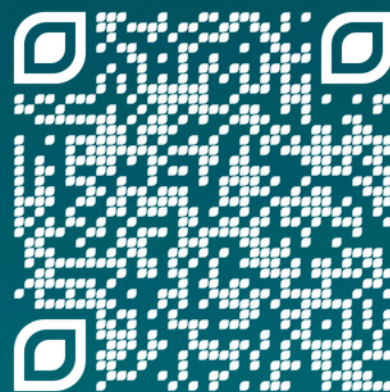
Who took part in the research?

This report builds on polling by GFI Europe with HarrisX and Plant Futures finding that 51% of UK adults want to eat less meat or dairy, more plant-based foods, or both.

Public First held focus groups with participants split across the three consumer segments identified in the polling as being open to changing their diets.

The analysis offers new ways of thinking about public understanding of plant-based meat and its role in supporting wider uptake of healthier, more sustainable diets. It points to opportunities for further research, strengthening the evidence base for those working to build a better food system.

Read the full
report



Reference: Conrad Astley, Plant-based meat and the ultra-processed food debate, GFI Europe, (2026).
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Image: Quorn



Driving protein diversity

The Good Food Institute Europe is a nonprofit think tank accelerating protein diversification for a more sustainable food system. GFI Europe is funded by philanthropy. **Get in touch:** europe@gfi.org.