

BEEF & PORK BUYER'S GUIDE



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BEEF

If you've given beef the boot because you think it's unhealthy, there is good reason to take a second look. Reasonably sized portions of lean cuts of beef are a great source of protein and delicious complement to vegetables. Few foods provide as much zinc, a mineral vital to growth and a healthy immune system. Beef also contains conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a healthy type of fat that, according to preliminary research, may help with weight loss and could play a role in reducing risk for heart disease and maintaining strong bones.

SHOPPING TIPS:

Beef is given quality grades determined by the amount of marbling and the age of the animal, both of which affect the tenderness, juiciness and flavor of the meat. The USDA assigns three possible grades: Prime, Choice and Select. Prime meat has the most marbling, or fat, within the meat, making it juicy and flavorful, but also increasing its fat content (including saturated fat); Select has the least marbling; Choice is in the middle.

In the meat case, fresh beef should be bright red. Vacuum-packaged beef will be maroon because of the lack of oxygen. It should be firm to the touch with little to no excess moisture in the package and the packaging should be in good condition. Finally, be sure to check the "sell-by" date.

HEALTHY CHOICES:

Tender cuts in the "loin" category, such as tenderloin, top loin and

sirloin, and flavorful cuts like flank and strip steak are lean and best for quick-cooking, dry-heat techniques like sautéing, grilling and broiling. Tough cuts like chuck and round become tender in long, moist-heat cooking, such as stewing or braising. Always trim visible fat from whichever cut of beef you choose.

PORK

Pork is so popular now that it occupies nearly as much space as chicken in grocery stores. It's an excellent source of many nutrients, including thiamin, niacin and riboflavin and vitamin B₆, and a good source of zinc and potassium. Unlike the pork of yore, today's pigs have been bred to be lean, which makes pork a healthy choice—and also makes it trickier to cook. It dries out when overcooked, so make sure to use an instant-read thermometer to cook it just to the right temperature (145°), and always let the meat rest before serving.

SHOPPING TIPS:

Look for pork that is light red to cherry red, never pale or white. The fat should be white and creamy with no dark spots. Fresh pork should never have any off odors. The best-tasting pork is marbled with flecks of fat interspersed in the lean meat.

Avoid pale, soft pork sitting in the package in liquid. This pork is called PSE (pale, soft and exudative) and indicates pork that comes from animals mishandled during processing. When you push down on the pork it will not spring back and when you cook it even more juices will flow out. The meat will be dry and tasteless even when cooked to the desired degree of doneness. Alert the manager at your store that you got bad meat.

Because lean pork can dry out so quickly when cooked, many manufacturers sell something called "enhanced" pork. It is injected with a solution of water, salt and phosphates. The percentage of water is usually around 8 to 10 percent. It has a soft, rubbery texture and a slightly acrid or bitter taste.

HEALTHY CHOICES:

Cuts like tenderloin, loin and sirloin from the middle section of the pig rival skinless chicken breast in percentage of fat, but have a richer flavor. Always trim visible fat from whichever cut of pork you choose.

STORAGE TIPS FOR BEEF & PORK:

- Refrigerate or freeze meat as soon as possible after purchase.
- If freezing meat for longer than two weeks, wrap in heavy-duty foil, freezer paper or freezer bags to prevent freezer burn.
- Frozen meat should be defrosted in the refrigerator, never at room temperature, to prevent bacterial growth.

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