



# USMEF Factsheet

## Beef Nutrition

August 2005

### Summary

Beef is a nutrition powerhouse: it is a major source of protein for muscle and organ health and an excellent dietary source of B-vitamins, iron, zinc, selenium and choline. Lean cuts of beef can be a healthy part of a low-fat diet; many lean cuts of beef have virtually as little saturated fat as skinless chicken breast and half the total fat of chicken thighs. An important dietary fatty acid plentiful in beef is conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which seems to help protect against cancer, heart disease, diabetes and enhance immune function and reduce body fat. Healthy individuals can consume 3 – 6 ounces of lean beef cuts daily to benefit from its protein, vitamins and minerals with relatively low fat.

### Background

Beef is loaded with many essential vitamins, minerals and amino acids (protein):

#### Zinc

Your body needs zinc for many essential functions such as growth and development, maintenance of the body's immune system, wound healing and appetite control. Beef is the number one source of zinc in many diets. *A 3-ounce serving of beef provides 39 percent of the zinc most people need in a day.*

#### Iron

Iron helps to carry oxygen to body cells and tissues, assists in making new red blood cells, aids in brain development and supports the immune system. Beef is the number three source of iron in many diets following iron-enriched breads and cereals. Meat consumption at a meal has been shown to increase the absorption of plant iron two- to four-fold. This enhancing effect is known as the "meat factor."

#### Protein

Protein plays a critical role in many bodily functions. Protein from animal sources, such as beef, is high-quality or complete protein – which means it contains all the essential amino acids (protein building blocks) that your body cannot make on its own.

Vegetables and grains also contain protein, but in lesser amounts – and they do not provide all the essential amino acids. *One 3-ounce serving of beef provides 50 percent of the protein recommended daily.*

#### B-Vitamins

Calorie for calorie, beef is one of the best sources of many essential B-vitamins – especially B-12 (cobalamin). Vitamin B-12 is only found in animal foods, and is necessary for the synthesis of DNA, the maintenance of nerve cells and normal blood formation. Niacin, riboflavin and B-6 are also abundant in beef products.



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### Fat

Half of the fatty acids in beef are monounsaturated, the same type of fatty acids found in olive oil and championed for their heart-healthy properties. In addition, approximately one-third of the saturated fat in beef is stearic acid, which does not raise blood cholesterol levels like other saturated fatty acids do. Lean beef fits easily into low-fat meal plans designed to decrease blood cholesterol levels. *Lean beef is just as effective as skinless chicken when it comes to lowering blood cholesterol levels.*

### Conjugated Linoleic Acid

Conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which may have anti-carcinogenic, anti-diabetic, anti-atherogenic and hypocholesterolemic properties, is a naturally occurring fatty acid in food from ruminants (cattle and sheep). CLA may help normalize blood glucose levels and prevent diabetes, and may contribute to lower serum cholesterol and triglyceride levels, which in turn may help prevent the blockage of artery walls. Initial studies show CLA has stimulated the immune system.

### Selenium

Beef is an excellent source of selenium, which is an antioxidant that works with vitamin E to help prevent damage to your body's cells. Recent studies have found adequate intake of selenium may reduce the risk of heart disease and certain types of cancers. *A 3-ounce serving of beef provides 31 percent of the selenium you need daily*

### Key Points

1. Beef is a highly nutritious source of many essential vitamins, minerals and amino acids; when eaten in moderation, beef is a vital part of a healthy diet for active lifestyles.
2. Lean cuts of beef can be nearly as low in saturated fat as skinless chicken breast and can definitely be a flavorful aspect of a diet low in fat.
3. Conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) is an important fatty acid contained in beef that may help protect against cancer, heart disease, diabetes and enhance immune function while reducing body fat.

### For More Information

For more information on beef nutrition, please see the [USMEF red meat nutrition resource page](#), which includes over a dozen links to beef nutrition factsheets and site resources. Also see the [USMEF beef nutrition backgrounder](#) for more details and research sources for these nutritional facts.

For additional site resources, see [beef.org - nutrition](http://beef.org - nutrition)

Also see <http://www.beefnutrition.org/>