

Ironing Out Differences

An Australian beef promotion program is setting the record straight on beef's nutritional benefits by convincing consumers and health professionals that it is the single best source of iron in a healthy diet.

BY KEITHE VANS

People like beef, Australian beef producers contend, but they eat less of it, or none at all, because they've been misled about beef's nutritional benefits.

To counter this attitude, the Australian Meat and Live-Stock Corp. has developed a dramatic advertising and promotion campaign to emphasize the importance of eating beef. And it's working. The campaign has changed the attitudes of consumers, doctors and dietitians about the importance of iron in the diet. A majority now believe that beef is the single best source of iron.

Both the advertising and

public relations campaigns emphasize research that shows lean beef is a person's best source of absorbable iron. For example, the illustration for a two-page print ad features two plates, one containing around 4 ounces (oz.) of lean beef, the other with 4 pounds (lb.) of cooked spinach. The headline reads, "If you rarely eat beef, we hope you're big on spinach." The ad goes on to explain that people have the option of getting half their daily absorbable iron from the serving of lean rump steak or the heaping plate of cooked spinach.

It's an eye opener, particularly for people who have long

believed the Popeye propaganda that spinach is iron food.

Andrea Mortensen, manager of nutrition for the Australian Meat and Live-Stock Corp., told the World Angus Forum audience in Sydney last October that their surveys have shown that the most significant dietary change in the Australian population has been to cut back on fat, and that 18% of the population believed this meant they should cut back on beef consumption, or eliminate it all together. As a result, many people, especially women, aren't getting enough dietary iron.

Visualizing the difference

Most people think of fish as a

123g grilled lean rump steak, one way to absorb half your daily iron needs.

1.9kg steamed snapper, another way to absorb half your daily iron needs.

Lean Beef
Your best source of essential daily iron.
Approved by the Australian Meat and Live-Stock Corporation.

healthy food, which it is, but it contains little absorbable iron, Mortensen explains. A two-page full-color ad (see photo) was produced to address this misconception. The ad features a platter with 4 oz. of beef and another with a 4 oz. steamed snapper. Both, the ad points out, will supply half of your daily need of absorbable iron—the choice is yours.

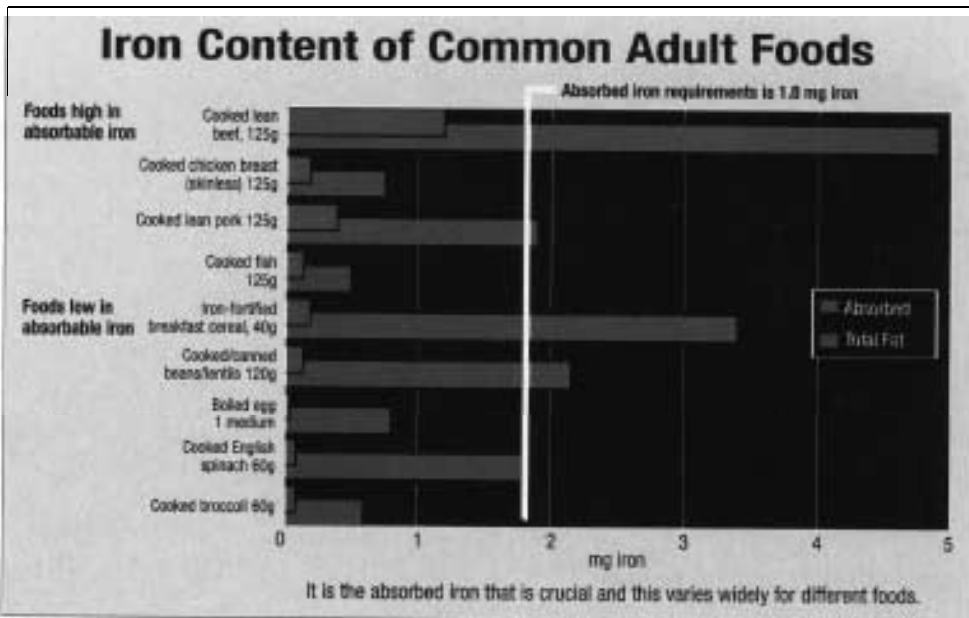
Chicken, too, is relatively low in iron. Another ad features the same 4-oz. portion of lean beef and a whole roasted chicken on another platter. The copy stresses that each supplies the same amount of absorbable iron — 4 oz. or less of beef or a whole chicken. It makes you think.

There are two kinds of iron, the Australian promotion points out — heme iron that is found in red meats, and to a lesser extent in fish, and non-heme iron. Heme iron is more easily absorbed into the body. Furthermore, consuming beef with its higher levels of heme iron, increases the absorption of non-heme iron found in breakfast cereals, fruits, vegetables, beans and eggs.

To highlight this beef benefit, the Meat and Live-Stock Corp. developed an advertisement showing that a person would have to consume nearly 12 lb. of pasta and 1/2 lb. of stir-fried vegetables to obtain half their daily requirement of iron. But, if they add lean beef to the stir fry they would need only 13 oz. of pasta and 4.5 oz. of vegetables to get half of a person's daily iron requirement. The beef increases the availability of iron from the pasta and vegetables. As a result, nearly one-quarter of the usable iron in the dish comes from the vegetables and pasta.

Child necessity

When it comes to child development, "Beef is brain food," Andrea Mortensen says. A striking television commercial featuring a cute healthy baby drives home the need for beef that babies and young children have. A supplementary brochure, designed for young



mothers, goes into detail on baby nutrition and encourages feeding meat to babies, beginning with gradual introduction between 6 and 9 months of age. Because of their rapid growth, babies have high iron needs, particularly during the first year, the ad and the brochure explain. They reiterate the fact that iron from red meat is up to 10 times more easily absorbed and that it helps the body absorb up to three times more non-heme iron from vegetables.

The iron density of beef, compared to chicken and fish, is dramatically higher, according to research cited by the Australian Meat and Live-Stock Corp. The iron and zinc that comes with 238 calories of beef provides nearly double the iron and three times the zinc available from 238 calories of chicken. The advantage over fish is even more pronounced. Beef provides more than twice the amount of iron provided by fish and three times the zinc. "Lean beef helps make every calorie count," Mortensen says.

Targeting women

Much of the beef promotion is aimed directly at Australian women. About seven out of 10 women in Australia, aged 25-54 get less than the recommended dietary intake of iron, Mortensen says. Special ads to

remind women of this fact have been prepared to run strictly in women's magazines.

They also point out that extra iron is needed by women who seek the health benefits of regular exercise. Since iron carries oxygen to the body through the blood stream, the ads remind women that without sufficient iron their exercise programs could increase their iron deficiency.

"Lean beef helps make every calorie count."

-Andrea Mortensen

Furthermore, the promotion explains that iron deficiency in teenage girls can reduce attention span and bring on learning difficulties.

The hard-hitting program has also challenged the notion that beef is a fattening food, according to Mortensen. Research shows that a weight-loss diet based on soy protein does not offer any special cardiovascular benefits over a weight-loss diet containing lean beef. In fact beef provides some benefits over soybeans.

Getting results

The beef marketing program has changed Australian consumer attitudes about iron in the diet, particularly among women. Prior to the campaign only 44% of women believed beef was the best source of iron. By 1995 the number had increased to 70%. The number of women who believed that iron in red meat is more easily absorbed grew from 26% in 1993 to 44% in 1995.

Health professionals were also positively influenced. In 1995 78% of physicians and dietitians in the most populous eastern Australian states agreed that red meat, particularly beef, was the best source of iron. Few called for their patients to cut beef from their diets. Instead, 69% said they recommend eating more lean red meat for anemia and iron deficiency, and 90% said that iron was the single most important benefit of beef.

How different are Australian consumers and health care professionals from their American counterparts? Probably not much, but a fairly simple research project could find out. One thing is sure, the Australians have shown a strong advertising and promotion campaign, based on beef's health advantages, can change the way people think and eventually act.

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