

# Ethical aspects of fat

## Should we be relying more on biofuels?

Currently, only about 4 per cent of fuel used in road vehicles and mobile machines in the UK is renewable. Most renewable fuel is biodiesel or bioethanol, with 26 million litres of biodiesel (10 per cent of all [biofuels](#)) coming from recycled cooking oils produced in the UK and 34 million litres of bioethanol (13 per cent of all biofuels) coming from corn produced in Ukraine.

Proponents of biofuels say that they reduce [greenhouse gas](#) emissions and help to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. However, is growing bioenergy crops really an efficient use of land? For bioenergy to meet even 20 per cent of the world's total energy needs in 2050, yearly harvests of all plant materials would have to double. It's hard to imagine where all that extra space would come from and what impact it would have on the food supply.

Biofuels and biogas can also be produced from waste biomass from forestry and other industries. However, it's thought that the energy these wastes could yield is limited.

Pros	Cons
Reductions in the amount of energy produced from fossil fuels.	Biofuel crops compete for space with food crops.
Bioenergy crops can be grown on poorer-quality land than food crops.	When burnt, biofuels still produce greenhouse gases.

## Should the use of palm oil be banned worldwide?

[Palm oil](#) accounts for two-thirds of internationally traded vegetable oils. Worldwide, over 54 million tonnes of palm oil were produced in 2013.

It is used in a plethora of food and cleaning products. You'll find it in peanut butter, ready-made pizzas and shampoos. It's used because it's cheap to produce and has a longer shelf-life than other oils.

The downside to all this cheap oil is that millions of hectares of rainforest have been converted to palm oil plantations, posing a major threat to [biodiversity](#). It's not just charismatic animals like orangutans that lose their habitats. Each 1,000 hectares of rainforest is estimated to be home to 750 tree species, 400 bird species and 150 butterfly species. In the EU, new food labelling regulations introduced in 2014 mean that manufacturers can no longer hide the presence of palm oil in their products under the generic term 'vegetable oils'.

Two major producers of palm oil, including the world's largest, have committed to zero deforestation policies, while manufacturers are pledging to use sustainable palm oil or stop using it altogether under voluntary agreements.

Pros	Cons
Protection of rainforest biodiversity and species of unknown medical significance.	Possible breakdown of local economies based on palm oil.
Protection of trees as important carbon sinks.	Growing other less efficient oil crops takes up even more land.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Can you think of other pros and cons?
- Are these actions enough, or should palm oil production be banned altogether?

### ***Should we tax fatty foods in the UK?***

In 2011, the Danish government introduced a fat tax as part of a new strategy to change behaviour and reduce lifestyle-related illnesses such as obesity, cancer and heart disease.

All products containing more than 2.3 g of saturated fat were taxed based on the levels of saturated fat they contained. Sugary foods and soft drinks were also taxed.

In response, some people decided to buy Danish food products in neighbouring Germany, where they were cheaper despite being imported. It is estimated that in 2012 Danish consumers paid an extra €170 million in fat taxes, but without any obvious impact on their fat consumption or health. By the end of 2012, the fat tax had been abolished.

In the UK, public health bodies are still campaigning for taxes on fat, sugar and salt similar to those abolished in Denmark. In 2015, for example, Public Health England published a report that suggested, among other measures, a tax on high-sugar foods.

In March 2016, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a sugar tax set to start in 2018. It would target fizzy drinks, not pure fruit juice or milk-based drinks. The tax has been reported already to have had some impact<sup>1</sup> with companies producing soft drinks high in sugar changing their products for the consumer but the higher prices are seen to affect the poorest. Whatever the final outcome, does a tax change people's behaviour?

Pros of a fat tax	Cons of a fat tax
Potential to reduce saturated fat intake in a country where a quarter of people are classified as obese.	Administrative and economic burdens on food industry including small businesses.
In the UK there is less opportunity to travel to other countries to shop for fatty foods.	No proven impact on eating habits or health.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Can you think of other pros and cons for a fat tax?
- How well do you think a fat tax would work in the UK?
- Which would be more effective: a fat tax or a sugar tax? Why?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-43372295>