

# Are healthier people going to save the planet?

By [Dr Craig Nossel](#)

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Does our sensitivity to the planet's health depend on the status of our own, personal health? What was for lunch today? What's in your shopping trolley tonight? Are you drinking something from a plastic cup or bottle as you read this? And does it matter?



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The answer is yes. Not only do our everyday food choices have significant power over our own health, they also play a large role in the fate of the land we live in, its surrounding oceans, and the creatures and marine life that inhabit these spaces.

If one thing has become a reality for many Capetonians in recent months, it's planetary health. Living in a rain-deprived city has branded climate change firmly into their 'here and now'. They know that every time we eat or drink anything, we make a powerful choice towards improving the planet's ability to sustain life or deepening its decline. And this reality isn't limited to the Cape – it currently does (and will increasingly) affect us all.

## Does caring for your own health make you better at caring for the planet?

There's evidence that healthy eating habits – practiced by individuals – collectively do the Earth a world of good. We wanted to see for ourselves just how, in a local context, so we surveyed 1,678 Discovery Vitality members.

Some context: Vitality is a science-based wellness programme that rewards members for daily, healthy behaviours. Engagement in the programme has led to a significant increase in healthy habits, with members buying on average 20 million HealthyFood baskets each year and Vitality Active Rewards members exercising 25% more than before.

The majority (96%) of surveyed respondents reported that they consider the environmental impact of their food choices. An average of 74% of participants said healthy food options mattered to them – most so for members on the penultimate Vitality tier, Gold (80%), and top-tier Diamond status (78%).

Diamond members are also more likely to recycle food packaging every day (49%) compared to the 42% overall average. Also, 61% of members surveyed said that they try to buy locally sourced food wherever possible.



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## **How does rewarding healthy food purchases help our carbon footprint?**

Vitality's HealthyFood Benefit, which gives members 10-25% cashback on healthier food purchasing, encourages members to eat healthily and sustainably, promoting mostly whole, minimally processed foods.

The Vitality HealthyFood Benefit is all about buying and home-cooking locally sourced, whole plant foods and sustainable sources of protein, such as legumes. The HealthyFood benefit has not only had a positive impact on health, but also on the planet.

By subsidising purchases of healthy foods, we have seen increases in fruit and vegetable purchases of 5.7-8.5%. We've also decreased purchases of processed sugary and fatty foods by 5.6-7.2%. These shifts have resulted in an estimated 7-12% decrease in water use, an 8-13% decrease in land use, and an 8-10% decrease in greenhouse gas emissions – and a significant drop in the collective carbon footprint of the 1.7 million-member strong, Vitality family.

## **Our food on-demand culture is destroying the Earth**

Farm-to-fork, the detrimental effects of ensuring the world's food supply are staggering. It's estimated that the average plate of American food has travelled 1500 miles before being eaten. In the UK, 95% of all fruit is imported. Seasonal eating is foreign to most of us. Food travels vast distances to our tables, fuelling our carbon footprint and insatiable demand for variety at any cost.

The food we eat is responsible for 33% of our global carbon footprint. Agriculture accounts for 70% of the world's water use. The global population is predicted to grow to 10 billion by 2050. Food supply needs to increase by 50% to achieve this, with massive impact on planetary health. Tragically, one third of the food produced globally is wasted, while 800 million people starve every day.



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## Obesity eats away at sustainability

Globally, nearly 30% of the population is overweight or obese – two and a half times the number of under-nourished people. And, terrifyingly, almost 50% of the global population are predicted to be overweight or obese by 2030. There is also no sustainability in the massive impact obesity has on personal health, productivity and economic growth. Our global tsunami of non-communicable diseases of lifestyle – many linked to obesity – costs healthcare providers across the world, trillions.

Our 2017 Vitality ObecCity Index showed that it is increasingly uncommon for adults to prepare meals from scratch using raw ingredients, and more and more people rely on convenience meals and fast foods likely to cause weight gain as people fill up on high-salt foods, refined carbohydrates, highly processed, sweetened products and the fattiest cuts of meat, which can lead to deficiencies in essential nutrients and subsequent long-term health damage.

A 2017 study published in the *British Journal of Nutrition* showed that 52% of the foods most frequently advertised to South African children were high in fat, sugar, salt.



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## Our health is a mirror of the planet's

How long will our people allow this to happen? These dynamics are taking place against the backdrop of technology and digital access that has empowered today's customers with information like never before. Millennials in particular, and consumers across the board, are increasingly moving away from supporting products and businesses that erode planetary health.

Businesses that are not focused on the sustainability of people and our planet have no future. This is why we need more

food retailers and suppliers to launch sustainability initiatives, and all of us – as adults, parents and leaders – need to spread awareness of what it takes to get whole foods to our tables now, and what it will take to ensure their supply in the long term.

Food producers, restaurateurs and consumers have to go a step further, and be part of healing the planet. As we at Vitality know all too well, the health of every human being is a reliable mirror to the health of the planet.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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