

You are what your hair says you are: Follicles provide a map of your diet and health

Your mop can potentially shed light on whether you prefer veggie burgers or cheeseburgers, a new study has suggested.

Researchers from the University of Utah collected discarded hair from barbers and hair salons from 65 cities across the United States. From the chemical traces in the cuttings the scientists found that American diets are dominated by animal-derived protein like meat and dairy.

This type of hair analysis could be a useful tool to assess a community's dietary patterns and health risks, the researchers said.

"The takeaway here is that we can potentially identify regional, national, and temporal patterns of dietary habits with this approach," James Ehleringer, lead author of the study and distinguished professor at the University of Utah's School of Biological Sciences, said in an email.

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How exactly can you determine diet from strands of hair? Variations in carbon isotopes found in hair, Ehleringer said, reflect those found in different food products — either consumed directly or indirectly through animal feed, which in the United States is usually corn.

The study, which published [August 3] in the journal PNAS, found that animal-derived proteins, such as meat and dairy, accounted for 57% of US diets, on average.

Diets rich in protein, as opposed to plant-based ones, were associated with a greater risk of health problems like heart disease, the study said, citing existing research.

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