COMMENTARY

The pandemic amplifies meat’s downside

Dan Brook

Eating meat has long been a part of the American national identity, but this tradition has had devastating consequences for public health. As COVID-19 continues to spread across the country, the tide may finally be turning toward healthier alternatives.

“The pandemic is poised to usher in the biggest retreat for global meat eating in decades,” Bloomberg News recently reported. Beyond Meat, the first publicly traded, plant-based meat alternative company on the New York Stock Exchange, is inking deals around the world and its stock is soaring.

Most people can’t tell the difference between Beyond Meat and real meat. And there are many other brands on the rise: Impossible Foods, Gardein and so on.

Eating meat is associated with heart disease and heart attacks — the No. 1 cause of death in the world. Likewise, it increases the risk for stroke, various cancers, Type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer’s, kidney diseases, hypertension, obesity, osteoporosis, arthritis, endometriosis, impotence, gout and other very serious ailments.

About two-thirds of diseases in the United States are diet-related, as the U.S. surgeon general noted in a report on nutrition and public health. Indeed, a plant-based diet has been proved to be safe and, in many cases, healthier than consuming foods derived from animals. Vegetarians and vegans are, for example, are likely to live six to 10 years longer than their carnivorous counterparts.

Surgeries, medical devices, drugs and exercise sometimes treat and control heart disease, but only a plant-based diet has been able to reverse this leading cause of death.

“In America today, about half of all Americans die of heart attacks and strokes,” nutrition advocate Dr. Joel Fuhrman advised.

The American Institute for Cancer Research found that a plant-based diet, in addition to helping prevent heart disease, also lowers the risk for many cancers.

The pandemics of the previous century — the flu outbreaks of 1918, 1957 and 1968, each of which killed millions of people — originated in animals raised for meat. COVID-19 also originated in animals and the human appetite for them.

Whenever animals are cramped together, we risk contagion. As the prestigious medical journal The Lancet highlighted, “all new infectious diseases of human beings to emerge in the past (generation) have had an animal source.”

If there were no poultry industry, there would be no avian influenza. If there were no cattle industry, there would be no outbreaks of E. coli or mad cow disease. If there were no hog industry, there would be no swine flu. There would also be less deforestation and climate change.

“At the individual level,” Roni Neff, of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, explained, “it seems pretty clear that the No. 1 thing that can be done is to eat less meat and dairy.”

The meat, dairy and egg industries are unhealthy, unhappy and unsafe. It’s time we put them out to pasture.

Brook is author of the forthcoming book “Eating the Earth.” This column was produced for the Progressive Media Project and distributed by Tribune News Service.