

Turkey's "Healthy Halo"-Fact or Fiction?

By Karen Crawford, MS, RD, CSP

While perusing the protein section of my local grocery store recently, I noticed how many products come in a turkey version in lieu of beef, chicken or pork. In my trip through the meat department, I saw turkey bacon, turkey burgers, ground turkey, turkey tenderloin, sliced turkey, turkey pepperoni, turkey hotdogs, turkey pastrami and turkey sausage. Is turkey really that much healthier for you than beef, chicken or pork? Or, has the turkey industry created a "healthy halo" that makes consumers think that choosing the turkey version of their favorite protein varieties is the healthier way to go?

If you were to ask a Registered Dietitian about the best protein sources they would most likely reply with canned responses like, "choose lean cuts of beef", "pick white meat over dark meat", "trim the fat before cooking", and "choose healthy cooking methods such as grilling or baking". But, let's take a closer look at the turkey profile and see if this is a great marketing campaign or if turkey truly has health benefits that trump the other protein powerhouses.

The truth is that you can get lean cuts of turkey, chicken, beef and pork and not so lean cuts of all four too. In the table below, you can see how lean cuts of each type stack up to each other in a four-ounce serving.

Protein Types (all lean cuts):	Calories	Protein	Fat	Saturated Fat
Beef	208	35	6.5	2.5
Chicken	188	35	4	1.2
Turkey	152	34	0.8	0.4
Pork	120	18	4	1.6

Turkey does well against the competition as far as macronutrients are concerned—comparable amount of protein, but with less fat and saturated fat per serving—however, when considering micronutrients (vitamins and minerals), red meats (beef and pork) are a better source of iron, zinc, vitamins B6, B12 and niacin. Nutrition aside, chicken offers a very mild taste that can be very versatile in recipes.

The "healthy halo" that consumers have associated with turkey looks to be warranted, as long as we remember that the other protein sources are good for us as well. They each offer nutritional components that our diets need. It's best to incorporate a variety of protein sources, choose lean cuts, trim the fat and always prepare them using low fat cooking methods. Once again, it all comes down to variety and moderation. The Dietitian's mantra prevails yet again!