

## Earth Day from NY Times

Here at Ask NYT Climate, we usually dive into specific questions, from the greenest ways to dispose of pet waste to the most eco-friendly workout clothing. But because Tuesday is Earth Day, we're tackling one of the big questions: What is the single best thing I can do for the planet?

We put this to half a dozen experts who shared their advice on how to be the best planetary citizen possible.

### The thing

First, it's important to understand that climate change is a symptom of a larger issue: ecological overshoot, or the fact that humans are consuming resources faster than they can regenerate and producing more waste and pollution than nature can absorb, said William Rees, a human and ecological economist and professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia. The most effective solutions, then, address not just greenhouse gas emissions but overall consumption and pollution.

One of the most effective ways to avoid consumption in the first place, Dr. Rees said, is to [have a smaller family](#). But that might not be a realistic option for many people, for all kinds of personal, cultural and other reasons.

As [The New York Times's ethics columnist has pointed out](#), it might also be realistic to think that children who are raised with a sense of responsibility could — in personal and collective ways — be part of the solution, ensuring human survival on a livable planet by promoting adaptation, resilience and mitigation.

A less complicated recommendation is to cut back on meat. "On all these different metrics, eating a plant-based diet broadly improves sustainability," said Seth Wynes, a scientist specializing in climate change mitigation at the University of Waterloo in Ontario.

Livestock production accounts for about [14.5 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions](#). It's also a major driver of [habitat destruction and other environmental harms](#), including antibiotic resistance, water scarcity, biodiversity loss and pollution. The industry is linked to animal welfare abuses, and, in some cases, [it might increase the risk of a future pandemics](#).

Can't (or don't want to) go vegan? That's OK, said Kimberly Nicholas, a professor at Lund University in Sweden who studies the connections between people, land and climate. "Don't let perfect be the enemy of good."

Even modest reductions in meat consumption [can make a meaningful difference](#). If the average person in a high-income country skips meat just one day a week for a year, for example, they can save the carbon equivalent of driving 850 miles in a gas-powered car, and enough water to take a shower for 38 hours straight, [according to the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future](#).

### **The mind set**

It's challenging to definitively rank individual actions in order of effectiveness. Reducing meat consumption is one thing at the top of most well-researched lists. But rather than fixate on single, specific actions, experts suggest embracing a broader lifestyle shift that moves [away from unnecessary consumption](#).

"Take a moment to reflect on what a good life within planetary limits look like," said Diana Ivanova, an environmental social scientist at the University of Leeds in England. "What does 'enoughness' look and feel like?"

Transportation, for example, is an area where individual choices matter, too. If you live in a city with decent public transportation, or if you can walk or cycle where you need to go, forgoing a car can [significantly reduce your environmental impact](#).

Rethinking travel could help, too, like cutting back on nonessential flights and choosing trains when possible, Dr. Nicholas said.

Lastly, there's where you live: If you're shopping for a home, where and what you choose will set the stage for your future ecological footprint, Dr. Wynes said. Smaller homes or apartments, especially [ones that are well insulated](#), use less energy and encourage lower consumption overall.

If you have the means, switching to solar energy or a heat pump is also "a huge gift to the planet, and, over time, a huge win to your own pocketbook and independence" said Bill McKibben, founder of Third Act, a climate and democracy action group for people over 60.

### **Strength in numbers**

Still, there is only so much most of us can do as individuals. "Institutional change is absolutely necessary to bring emissions of greenhouse gasses to zero and reduce other environmental impacts," said Abigail Swann, a climate scientist at the University of Washington. "So the question becomes, how do our individual choices motivate institutional action?"

Voting matters, obviously. And participating in movements “large enough to change things” is essential, Mr. McKibben said. “Really, the most important thing an individual can do is be a little less of an individual and join together with others.”