

We are taking sustainability seriously research suggests

It has been revealed by new research published today that while 53% of people are trying to live a more sustainable lifestyle, there is a lack of understanding about which behavior changes make the biggest impact.

With carbon dioxide the main cause of human-induced climate change, it's clear that everyday lifestyle changes must be part of global climate action to reduce harmful emissions.

However, a new survey shows that many people need clearer information on the impact that key behavioural changes have on carbon emissions. While 53% of respondents thought their lifestyle was more sustainable than the average person in the UK, many significantly under- or over-estimated the difference that their actions make.



Unplug it. © 2022 J.L. Preece

The online study of over 800 participants was conducted by researchers at the [University of Hertfordshire](#) and [Edinburgh Science](#). Respondents were asked to estimate, on a scale, how many kilograms of carbon dioxide would be saved by taking a range of actions.

Many of the ratings were hugely inaccurate. In general, people overestimated the effects of less impactful changes, such as unplugging appliances, but underestimated the contribution of larger lifestyle changes such as following a vegetarian diet:

- unplugging a mobile phone charger saves around 2kg of CO₂ emissions per year; yet one third of respondents thought that it saved five times that (100kg or more).
- leaving a television on standby emits around 15kg of CO₂ per year, but a third of respondents estimated that it was far more significant (125 kg or more).
- becoming a vegetarian can save over 600kg, yet half of the respondents thought that it only saved 300kg or less.



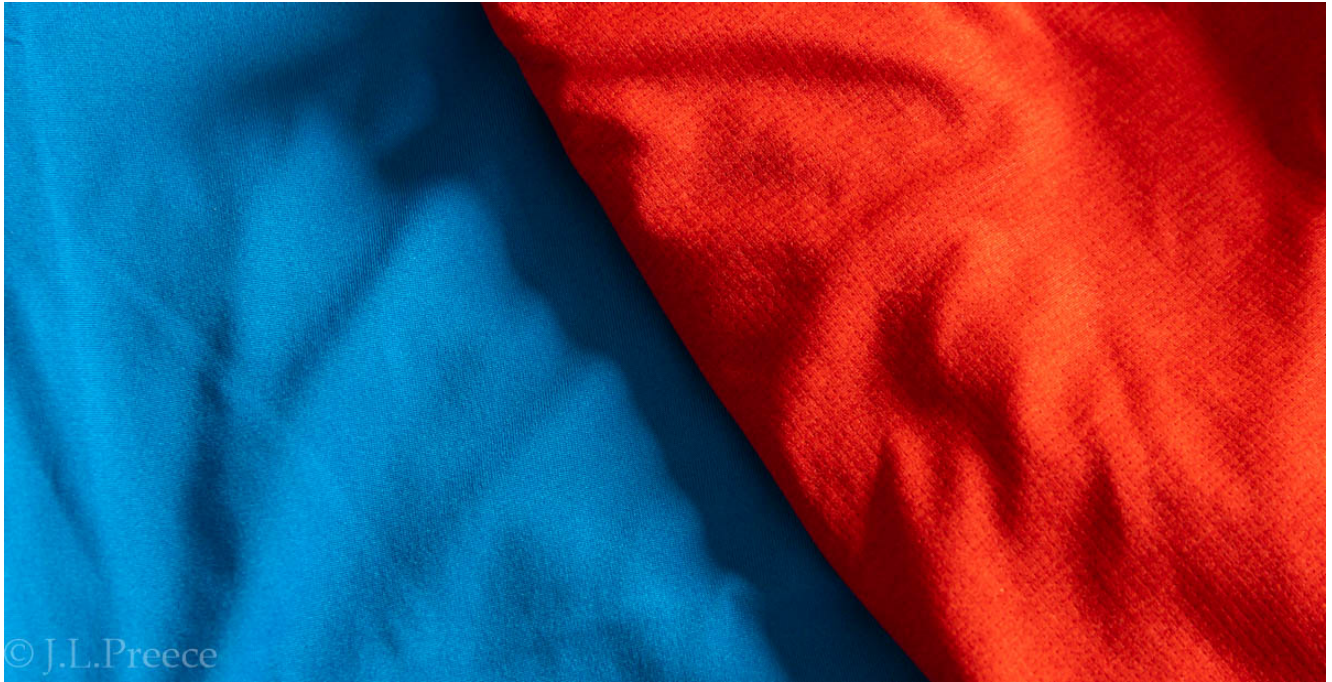
Become vegetarian. ©Sally Jubb 2015

Psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman from the University of Hertfordshire, who led the study, explained the significance of the findings:

“Every little helps, and people should consider doing whatever they can to cut emissions. However, these results suggest that when it comes to sustainable behaviour, there are many widely believed myths. There is a definite appetite to make changes, which is great, but people need to understand how they can make a real impact”.

Respondents were also asked to indicate how much they thought they knew about sustainable lifestyles, with 65% believing they know more about the topic than the average person in the UK. However, even those that rated their knowledge most highly, made inaccurate estimations.

For example, those rating themselves as highly knowledgeable significantly overestimated the impact of unplugging a phone charger (an average guess of 102kg), not leaving a television on standby (an average guess of 116kg), or even buying a blue jumper rather than a red one (an average guess of 37kg) – which has no impact at all.



No, it doesn't make any difference! © 2022 J.L. Preece
“The danger is that many people overestimate the impact of a few well-publicised behaviour changes, and fail to engage in more significant and important changes like stopping flying”, noted Professor Mike Page, cognitive psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire.

Simon Gage, Director of Edinburgh Science, welcomed the findings as a useful tool in how to approach climate action and education: “We are committed to helping people understand how to tackle climate change, and knowing the impact of certain behaviours is an important step in taking effective action”.

The researchers hope that the findings will help organisations and policymakers to support the public in understanding the impact that changes in their behaviour can have.