INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS
Introduction: Objectives

Objectives

- This report presents the results of six focus groups with Millennials about their nutrition knowledge and behavior. The research was conducted on behalf of the IFIC Foundation by Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc.

- The main objective was to gain an understanding of Millennials’ current eating habits as well as their views toward nutrition and healthful eating in order to help them balance their food and drink consumption and activity. In particular, IFIC Foundation wished to learn:
  - What influences Millennials' decisions about what to eat?
  - What are the barriers to more healthful eating patterns?
  - From what sources do they receive information about nutrition and balancing caloric intake with physical activity?
  - Whom do Millennials trust for nutrition information?

- In addition, a key objective was to test six messages for their effectiveness in motivating Millennials to achieve more healthful nutrition and activity levels consistent with the Dietary Guidelines. The messages tested were:

  - **Know your number.**
    Learning how many calories you should consume in a day is a critical first step in managing your weight.

  - **Fun stuff counts as exercise!**
    Get active with the family or friends whether it's soccer in the park, dancing to music, or taking a walk in your neighborhood.

  - **Take charge of your weight.**
    Balancing the calories you eat and drink with the calories you burn through physical activity puts you in control.

  - **Small steps = big changes.**
    Serve smaller portions to help curb calories and keep your weight on the right track.

  - **Base your plate on nutrient-rich foods that offer beneficial nutrients and fewer calories.**
    Choose fruits and vegetables, whole and enriched grains, lean meats, beans and nuts, and low-fat and fat-free dairy foods more often.

  - **Splurge sensibly.**
    Enjoy smaller amounts of the foods and drinks you love to satisfy your taste buds and avoid overdoing it.
Methodology

Six focus groups were held, including two in Little Rock, AR on October 23, 2013 and four in Baltimore, MD on October 29 and 30. The groups lasted two hours.

Two of the groups were comprised of individuals with high educational levels, defined as college grads and higher, and two were with individuals with no more than a high school education. These groups all included a mix of men and women. In addition, there was one female-only group of mixed educational levels, and one such male-only group. The group locations were as follows:

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All participants were born between 1983 and 1993, and accessed the internet at least several times per week. Other screening criteria included:

- No participants lived with parents. There was a mix of other living situations, including those living alone, with a spouse or partner, or with roommates.
- If they did live with a spouse or partner, that individual could not have more than a small influence on what the participant eats.
- Participants were of varying weights, from low/normal to overweight and obese, based on body mass index.
- There was a mix of self-reported healthfulness of eating patterns as well as influence of nutrition on diet.
- There was a mix of frequency of exercise.
- No participants had studied nutrition or diet after high school.
- None of the participants had a diet that was greatly restricted, although some were vegetarian or do avoid lactose.

The research was conducted by Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc.
Key Findings: Current Eating Habits

Millennials’ Current Eating Habits

- Most Millennials acknowledge the importance of eating healthfully, but all admit they do not always eat as healthfully as they would like. While most picture a healthful meal as consisting of lean meats and a starch along with fruits, vegetables, or a salad, many Millennials say their actual meals are more likely to consist of red meats or fried foods, with few or no vegetables or produce. Accordingly, the average grade they give the healthfulness of their eating is a C+.

Challenges to Eating More Healthfully

- Few admit that a lack of knowledge is a barrier to eating healthfully, although there do appear to be gaps in what Millennials know about nutrition, including what an appropriate serving size is, and how many calories per day is appropriate for them.

- Besides their knowledge limitations, there are two key barriers to eating healthfully:
  - **Lack of time, and a need to eat things “on the go.”** Millennials are looking for foods that are quick for them to obtain and that require minimal or no time to prepare. Even food packaging that facilitates eating on the run is helpful to them. They have difficulty fitting healthful cooking into their lifestyle.
  - **Lack of money.** There is a strong perception among young consumers that it is more expensive to eat healthfully. Even though they are likely spending more than they need to on premade and convenience foods, as well as dining out, they see bargain packaged goods and fast foods as ways to get full inexpensively.

- Millennials do a lot of their eating with friends, so it is not surprising that social dynamics present a challenge to more healthful eating as well. Millennials describe restaurant menus as having fewer healthful options, and they also say they are tempted to eat what their friends are eating when they are together.

- Difficulty exerting will power to exercise good choices and keep portion sizes moderate is another challenge.
Information Sources

- Millennials obtain information on nutrition from internet searches and internet-based news sources they read. Social media—including Pinterest and Instagram—and mobile apps are also sources they use. In addition, Millennials encounter nutrition related information on TV talk shows, in popular magazines, and in food-related documentaries. Only a few say health professionals have provided them nutrition information.

- Broadly, Millennials are highly skeptical of nutrition information from any source. The key cause of their skepticism seems to be a belief that the information itself, or the way it is portrayed, will have been influenced by corporate interests. A key factor several seem to weigh is whether a neutral third party has produced and/or confirmed the information.

- Even government agencies focused on food and nutrition (USDA and FDA in particular) are not immune to this skepticism, as many Millennials fear that special interest groups have too great an influence on their research.

- The key factors in whether Millennials will believe nutrition information they come across are whether it makes sense to them and whether it can be found from multiple sources.

- In addition, a number say they would be highly likely to believe nutrition information if it came from someone they know—especially if they could see how it "worked" for a friend or family member.

- And while few actually receive nutrition information from health professionals or independent universities with specific knowledge of the area, these would also be trusted sources for nutrition information.
Key Findings: Message Testing

Message Testing:

- Participants were shown six messages intended to motivate them to eat more healthfully, and they were asked to rate each message on clarity, application to their life, and motivation. The discussion of these messages focused mainly on what Millennials found motivating and what could be changed to make the messages even more motivational.

- Overall, a number of factors contribute to a message being perceived as motivational for Millennials. These include:
  - Being positive, upbeat, and encouraging
  - Suggesting a goal that they believe is attainable
  - Being short and to-the-point
  - Reflecting information they already know or something they are already doing in their lives.

- Among the six messages tested, two stand out as motivational because they incorporate a number of these qualities—the “Fun stuff counts” and the “Take charge of your weight” messages.

- By far, the most motivational message (considered highly motivating by at least three-quarters of Millennials) is the “Fun stuff counts as exercise” message. Group participants believe this message is “upbeat” and like that it encourages them to do more of what they are already doing. Several also appreciate the reminder to integrate more enjoyable, everyday activities into their fitness routine, and that they do not need to go to the gym to do something that counts. They say it makes exercising seem simple and achievable.

- Participants say this message could be improved even further if "cooler" activities were listed, perhaps if "sports" were mentioned rather than "soccer" specifically, and if some kind of solo activity could be included.

- The message encouraging them to “Take charge of their weight” is considered motivating to about half of Millennials, who are drawn to its positive nature and the suggestion that they are in control of this vital aspect of their health. They like that it focuses on the balance between calories and activity, rather than just one or the other. They also appreciate that it reminds them that beverages are a source of calories, since they might otherwise overlook that.
Message Testing:

- A key to the success of this message is that it gets Millennials' cognitive wheels turning. In particular, they want to learn how to estimate the calories in certain foods and how much energy they burn in their own activities. The message makes some actively think about how they could change their own eating habits.

- The main critique of this message is that it ignores how important the healthfulness of foods can be to health and weight control.

- None of the other four messages tested were considered motivating to more than about a third of Millennials.
CURRENT EATING HABITS
Most Millennials consider eating healthfully to be important. Those with high education levels are especially likely to think so.

Most of the Millennials in these focus groups make some effort to eat healthfully, and they say they think about the healthfulness of the foods they eat at least occasionally.

I try to make an effort to eat healthy. I think I fall short sometimes, just because of convenience. But I would say that when I’m making a conscious effort I do well.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

I [don’t] always eat as well as I should, but it is definitely very important to me, mostly just because I want to be healthy.—Male, High Education, Baltimore

When asked to rate how important they believe it is to eat healthfully, men and women give similar ratings, and, overall, the average is 3.7 (out of 5 on a five-point scale). Millennials with higher levels of education give higher ratings on average (4.1) than do those with less education (3.1).

Nearly all Millennials in the groups make a strong and direct connection between the foods they eat and their overall health, and most express concern about the times they are not able to eat healthfully.

[I know] I’m supposed to eat right, but I don’t have time for that. Honestly, it’s bad to say because we want to live, but…you’ve got to get something [to eat] and come back and help in the office.—Female, Low Education, Little Rock

Several also say they feel better when they eat healthfully, both in terms of the way their body feels and in their self image.

It makes you healthy and makes you fit, and you feel better about yourself when you eat healthy and when you plan your meals and aren’t always rushing to get fast food.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

My weight has been fluctuating over the years, and I’ve noticed when I am a little lighter, I feel a little bit better. Things hurt a little bit less. I can move up and down stairs a lot quicker. But mostly it’s a feel good thing, to look nice in front of my girlfriend or whatever. In terms of eating healthfully, it’s not only just the image thing, but the physical feel.—Male, High Education, Baltimore
They understand the connection between food and health, but their food choices are driven mainly by convenience and cost.

- As Millennials describe their recent meals and snacks and what influenced them to choose the foods they ate, convenience and cost dominate.

  I had soup and salad from Olive Garden for lunch today. It was driven by convenience and price, because it’s all you can eat for $6 and it’s right next to my job.—Female, Low Education, Little Rock

- These Millennials are busy in their professional and personal lives, so they talk about convenience in terms of time savings. Their food choices are often based on their desire to:
  - Minimize the time it takes to shop for and prepare meals
  - Pick up foods or eat in restaurants that are close to their home or workplace
  - Eat "on the go"

- For these reasons, many report eating frozen meals, eating granola bars for breakfast while driving, stopping at convenience stores for meals/snacks, and picking up meals at fast food restaurants. One eats pizza three times a week because he can get it at the gas station 15 minutes away rather than driving 30 minutes to a grocery store.

  It’s the type of job I have…I drive and deliver things and I just don’t have time to stop. So I’m not really trying to watch what I eat, it’s just an eat-and-go type of thing. Because you don’t have time to be healthy on the go.—Male, Low Education, Baltimore

  My early morning breakfast would be a couple of chicken rollers from 7-Eleven and in the corner, chili and cheese and onions. Then at lunch, I would have a king size Kit Kat. Nowadays I go to 7-Eleven and I get a little turkey and ham sub… especially if I’m running late. I can grab it, I don’t have to wait for somebody to make it and all I’ve got to do is get to work.—Male, Low Education, Baltimore

  I like things that I can grab real quick for breakfast, because I never have time to sit down and eat breakfast. So I always get bananas and stuff that I can just grab and go. I eat yogurts too. So I have those for lunch and breakfast.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

- Foods that are packaged to be eaten on the run are helpful (such as single serving items, snack bars or sandwiches that can be unwrapped and eaten without heating).

- On the positive side, however, the desire for quick, convenient meals also spurs some Millennials to cook large quantities of food so they have plenty for leftovers.
Millennials tend not to plan meals. They also believe that it costs more to eat healthfully.

- With such an on-the-go lifestyle, it is not a surprise that Millennials say most of their meals are unplanned. They explain that their meals are based primarily on what is available or accessible to them at the moment.

  I don't have time. I'm so busy all the time. I just can't plan what I eat. I eat because I'm hungry. I don't plan when I'm going to be hungry and what I'm going to do about it.—Female, Low Education, Baltimore

- Several Millennials believe it costs more to eat healthfully. They say frozen meals can be cheaper than home made ones, and they point out that regular produce and juices are cheaper than their organic alternatives. Several say that fast food “dollar menus” fill them up inexpensively.

  It’s more expensive to eat healthy. I’ll buy some fruit and then I’ll buy a basket or bag of fruit, and that’s not going to get me full…So then I’ll go buy some chicken and then some rice. And they just charge more for healthier food in the grocery store. If you just go to the freezer and get some Stouffer’s or something or a Hungry Man…I've seen them for $1 apiece…Eat seven of those and you've got dinner seven days a week for $7.—Male, Low Education, Little Rock

  Sometimes it's cheaper to go out and buy the quick meal at McDonald's than it is to actually go to a grocery store to prepare a decent meal for yourself that is more healthy.—Male, High Education, Baltimore
Family upbringing, peer influence, social situations, mood, and taste also affect food choices.

▶ These young consumers’ food choices also appear to be influenced significantly by their experiences growing up. They prefer the types of foods that were served in their childhood home, and often think back to the information and habits they learned as children—including the food pyramid.

   *It’s just how you’re brought up I guess. In school they teach you the food pyramid and they tell you what’s right and what’s wrong. Not too many of this and a whole bunch of this.*—Female, High Education, Little Rock

▶ Social situations present a particular challenge to Millennials’ nutrition, because they are both more likely to go to restaurant when they are with others and to choose less healthful options from menus. Some also list portion sizes and the amount and types of fat as issues they face when eating in restaurants.

   *Usually when I go out to eat I usually don’t eat so healthy. I usually eat healthier at home.*—Male, High Education, Little Rock

   *When I go to a restaurant I’ll try to at least cheat a little and if I get a meal I’ll get a salad maybe as an appetizer, but then generally it will be a burger or something I know is not healthy.*—Male, Low Education, Baltimore

   *It takes a lot more discipline to take the extra step to get the healthy food—to say I’m not going to eat pizza with my coworkers, I’m going to stick to my sandwich.*—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

▶ On the other hand, a few do say that their friends or family members who eat healthfully do encourage them to do so as well. For example, a few say they have friends or family members who advocate juicing or eating organic produce.

▶ A few women add that their mood influences what they eat, as they will sometimes search for “comfort food” or will eat more than they would otherwise when they are under stress. Others also seek foods that will make them feel full.

   *It sort of depends on my mood…But I think if I’ve had a really long day and I just want pizza or something. It’s comforting. I will make that happen, if I can.*—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

▶ Predictably, taste is also a strong influence on Millennials’ food choices. Of course, individual preferences for specific foods have a role in food decisions, but some also describe this as "what they feel like eating" at any given time.
Most Millennials acknowledge that their actual eating habits differ from their perceptions of healthful eating in several vital areas.

As an example of this understanding, the photographs on the left were selected by two participants to compare their own eating habits to what they picture as healthful eating habits.

Most commonly, compared to their current eating, Millennials see healthful choices as including:

- A larger amount of fruits and vegetables
- Less fats, sugars, and fried foods
- Smaller serving sizes

Millennials realize they could be eating more healthfully.
Typical Millennials give themselves a C+ for the healthfulness of their diet.

- Given the gaps in what they actually eat and what they consider to be healthful eating, it may not be surprising that many Millennials give themselves a grade of C+, on average. This grade reflects both their efforts to eat healthfully, but also their recognition that there is substantial room for improvement.

- Even if healthfulness takes a back seat to the more mechanical issues of getting food when it is needed, Millennials do consider their foods’ impact on their health in deciding what to eat.
  - Some say they try to vary the types of foods they include in a single meal (e.g., "starch, vegetable, protein") in a given meal or day in order to ensure they have a balance in the foods they eat.
  - Others choose healthful foods to compensate for less healthful meals they have had recently or that they anticipate having.
  - Several also say that healthfulness is a key aspect of their online searches for recipes, and many also look at the labels and other packaging information for specific content of their foods, especially fats and sodium. And, among Millennial women in particular, watching calories is a factor in deciding what they will eat.
  - As mentioned earlier, a number of participants think that organic food is more healthful than non-organic alternatives, and try to purchase organic foods when their budget allows.

*I just know that it’s not packed with pesticides and hormones. It’s natural. I don’t want a bunch of bad things entering my body.*—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore
Barriers to eating more healthfully include lack of money, time, and planning.

- Nearly all participating Millennials acknowledge that they generally do not eat as healthfully as they would like. Their top two reasons—lack of money and lack of time—parallel the top factors they identified as driving their food choices.

- Many Millennials appear convinced that eating healthfully is too expensive for them to afford. They may not realize that they are paying a premium for the convenience foods that they eat on the go (e.g., pre-packaged individual servings, frozen meals, pre-made sandwiches), and that their frequent restaurant meals cost more than home cooked foods as well.

  Moneywise, I don't make that much. It's hard. When you don't make that type of money, you can't go buy the healthier foods.—Female, Low Education, Baltimore

  Like he was saying, the good stuff is so expensive versus chips are on sale for $1.99. That bag of salad is $4. I buy the chips because I can afford it.—Female, Low Education, Baltimore

- Many also believe that it is too time consuming to prepare their own healthful meals, when they count the time to shop, prepare, eat, and clean up. And, when Millennials grab what is convenient or what is around, they know they tend to make less healthful choices.

  It seems like to increase my healthy food would be time-consuming. [It involves] a lot more planning, a lot more preparing, a lot more distance that I have to travel to get what I need that I think is healthy.—Female, Low Education, Baltimore

  It’s so unpredictable when I’m going to be eating. It depends how busy I am. I work a lot so I eat on the go a lot. But when I’m at home and I have the free time, I will cook and I will eat healthy. So sometimes it’s more circumstance than my own decisions.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  The weekend is when I’m out running errands, and I just grab whatever is around, or we have friends over with all the snacking and stuff. The weekends are always like my cheating days, and I don't do good.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore
Lack of knowledge is another challenge, especially on the ideal number of calories and proper portion sizes.

- Interestingly, while very few say they don’t know how to eat healthfully, a number of knowledge gaps are evident. For example, the Millennials in these groups show they are unaware of:
  - How many calories are appropriate for them to eat in a day
  - What portion sizes are appropriate for them
  - How they can eat healthfully for a reasonable cost
  - How to minimize preparation time/effort with healthful foods

- For at least one participant, the issue is not a lack of knowledge about what she should eat, but rather how to integrate those healthful actions into her life.

  *I know how to be healthy. I know what’s healthy, but it’s just hard to get on a routine to eat portioned meals and to balance it out to eat what you’re supposed to and get the right nutrients. And drinking enough water and exercise enough and it’s just too much to do.*—Female, Low Education, Little Rock.

- Likewise, lack of willpower is a challenge for a few. They may plan to have very small portions of less healthful food, but often end up eating more than they were intending.
Several lifestyle factors can contribute to less healthful eating habits.

- Another barrier to better eating is experienced by Millennials who live alone. They do not like to spend the time to cook just for themselves and feel too much would go to waste.

  *I live by myself. I don’t cook for other people, I cook for myself, and they don’t exactly make cookbooks for one. I work seven days a week. Finding the time and the energy to even cook, let alone cook enough so that I have leftovers, a lot of times I find it [hard].—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore*

- In addition, while only a couple explicitly mention difficulty getting to a full grocery store, a lack of easy access to healthful and inexpensive alternatives does appear to have an impact on Millennials’ nutrition decisions.

  - One participant, for example, cites the necessity of going to several stores—a nearby discount store for inexpensive, non-perishable items and another that is much farther away to purchase produce.
  
  - Another relies on convenience stores for many of his meals because a grocery store is further away.

- A few others add that they do purchase fruits and vegetables (or that they would purchase more) in an attempt to eat more healthfully, but that those foods often spoil before they can be consumed.
Still, many Millennials are making a concerted effort to eat more healthfully.

- Many Millennials report having made changes to the way they eat in the past year. Common efforts include:
  - Cutting out sugars or carbohydrates
  - Minimizing "junk food" or fried foods
  - Consuming more balanced meals, consisting of several healthful ingredients
  - Reducing consumption of meat, primarily beef and pork

- Several report making an effort to eat breakfast. This seems primarily due to a desire to spread out their calorie consumption over several meals, though for a few it is an attempt to “start the day right,” that is, to put themselves on a healthful path for the rest of the day.

- By far, the most common reasons for making these changes to eating habits are a desire to lose weight and to “feel better,” which generally includes having more energy or improved digestive health.

- A few also add that they feel better about themselves psychologically when they eat healthfully, deriving a sense of satisfaction from the time and effort they spent doing something for their health, and sensing that they are more physically attractive to others.

- Interestingly, some women feel more attractive to themselves if their clothes fit them well. Some also use the fit of their clothing when they shift wardrobe from season to season as a measure of whether they are putting on weight.

- A few Millennials note that they have a family history of non-communicable diseases, and have made a change in the way they eat to minimize their risk of developing such conditions later in life.

- Finally, a few have changed the way they eat after changing their living situation—moving out of their parents’ home or away from a college dining hall, for example.
3 SOURCES OF NUTRITION INFORMATION
Millennials' information about nutrition comes from a variety of sources, with web-based sources most common.

- Millennials receive information about nutrition from a wide range of information sources, though no single specific source stands out as primary for a majority of them.

- Many have used the internet to find information about nutrition and healthful eating, typically by using a search engine and following the links that pique their interest. Several have also encountered information on internet news pages such as Yahoo! news.

- Several say they have also come across nutrition information on social media sites. Some use Pinterest, for example, to search for recipes. On Instagram they may see weight loss or fitness success stories that they want to emulate.

  *I look up healthy recipes. Because I didn't cook two years ago, so everything I cook I have to look something up. I tend to look up healthy things.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore*

- A number have heard information about how to eat healthfully directly from others in their social circles.

- Several Millennials have, at some point, used smartphone applications that can help them in specific areas of eating healthfully, although only a few currently use them. Some of those mentioned include My Fitness Pal, Weight Watchers, and Buycott (which scans bar codes on packaging to identify the social causes supported by companies). Awareness and usage of such smart phone apps appear to be highest among women and those with higher education.

- TV and print media sources reach some Millennials, including:
  - Daytime talk shows, with Dr. Oz mentioned fairly frequently
  - National or local news segments, though these are less common

- Several also mention seeing nutrition information in magazines, such as Men’s Health, Women’s Health, or cooking magazines that focus on healthful eating.

- A few also cite documentaries as sources of nutrition information including “Super size me,” “Food, Inc.” (a documentary about the perils of modern food production), and a documentary created by the Chipotle chain of restaurants.

- Only a few report receiving information about nutrition a physician or a trainer, but other health professionals are not mentioned.
Millennials are highly skeptical of all sources of nutrition information.

- Millennials appear to be fairly skeptical of nearly all sources of nutrition information.

- The primary reason for their skepticism is a belief that the information would be influenced, even tainted, by the self-interest of the organization that is providing it.

  *There’s always an angle. There’s always somebody trying to sell something. Nothing is ever purely unbiased.* —Male, High Education, Little Rock

- Several say one of the reasons why they do not trust much of the nutritional information they see is because information that is presented as true today may be superseded by conflicting advice tomorrow.

  *A lot of people are skeptical because you’ve been bombarded by so much information and a lot of the information has turned out to be false.* —Male, Low Education, Baltimore

- Millennials have mixed views toward government sources of nutrition in general, and the USDA in particular. While some would trust the USDA—saying it would provide sound, rigorous, and unbiased research—others believe it would be influenced by corporations or special interest groups. Other perceptions of the USDA are that its information would be too long, technical, and not geared toward the average consumer.

  *I guess I would trust it; it’s a government source, but it just sounds really boring to me, and I just wouldn’t be interested in hearing what they had to say… I would rather stick to other things like something that is really going to catch my attention more.* —Female, High Education, Baltimore

- Willingness to trust information provided by USDA appears to be higher among those with college educations than among those with lower levels of education.
 Millennials trust information that makes sense to them and that has worked for people they know.

- Because of their general skepticism about any nutrition information, young consumers rely on their own judgment to decide what is best. In many ways, this means that information will have to fit with what they already know before it can be believed.

- At best, nutrition messages that do not fit with what they already know may be seen as “fads.” However, at worst, messages that run counter to conventional wisdom are viewed as biased, unreliable, or some kind of scam.

  *For me, in terms of the influence, it has to make sense. When I read something that says, “Everyone is eating wrong. You have to do this instead,” and no one knew this until now, it doesn’t make sense to me at all. So it’s hard for me to believe.—Male, High Education, Baltimore*

- Repetition is also key to believing information about nutrition. Millennials are more apt to trust information if they have seen or heard it multiple times or in multiple places.

  *If I feel like it makes sense and I can find it other places where it says similar or the same things.—Female, High Education, Little Rock*

  *I think the biggest thing is…gathering a lot of information and then seeing which ones match. So…if you have 1,000 websites that you’ve checked out…that say, “Hey, you need to have breakfast, it’s probably a good idea.” It’s seeing a recurring theme across a lot of different mediums.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore*

  *When all the sources agree on certain things, you know that is probably true, because it’s just like everybody is saying it and no matter what their interest is in it.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore*

- Millennials also trust close friends or family members, who presumably would have an interest in their well-being and who would be less apt to be swayed by any outside influences. And, especially when they see clear results derived from a particular nutritional practice in others, Millennials are much more likely to believe it.

  *I have to know somebody who has tried it and see the results.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore*

  *The people that are before and after—it makes them trustworthy when they can say, “I’ve been there. I’ve done this. This is what I did here.”.—Female, Low Education, Baltimore*

  *I feel like if it’s a friend of mine or someone that I trust, then they are not giving me bad information, and if it works for them, it will work for me kind of thing.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore*

- Finally, although not a common source for nutrition information currently, most Millennials do acknowledge that hearing nutrition information from medical professionals, universities, or others who have advanced training on the subject would make them more likely to believe it.
Many Millennials are familiar with the MyPlate graphic and its recommendations.

- When asked specifically about the MyPlate graphic, many Millennials say they are familiar with it, though only a few volunteer that they regularly think of it as a guide for their eating habits without such prompting.

- By and large, Millennials feel the graphic is clear and understandable, and believe that the current plate-based guidelines are now more intuitive than the previous pyramid approach. A few do report that they are confused by some part of the graphic (for instance, whether it represents a single meal or a full day’s eating), and others volunteer skepticism about the validity of the graphic, fearing its recommendations may have been influenced by certain entities within the food industry.
MESSAGES
Participants were shown six messages intended to motivate them to be more healthful in balancing eating and activity.

In each focus group, participants were presented with six messages and asked to rate each of them on a scale of 1 ("Not at all") to 5 ("Extremely") in terms of:

- How clear it is to them
- How much it speaks to them
- How much it motivates them to take the recommended action

Although the ratings from each of the above questions are presented in this report, the ratings of motivation are presented in more detail, as the discussion in all groups centered around the motivation ratings, and, in particular, why participants do or do not find a message motivating, and what could be changed to make it more motivating.

The statements tested were:

- **Know your number.**
  Learning how many calories you should consume in a day is a critical first step in managing your weight.

- **Fun stuff counts as exercise!**
  Get active with the family or friends whether it’s soccer in the park, dancing to music, or taking a walk in your neighborhood.

- **Take charge of your weight.**
  Balancing the calories you eat and drink with the calories you burn through physical activity puts you in control.

- **Small steps = big changes.**
  Serve smaller portions to help curb calories and keep your weight on the right track.

- **Base your plate on nutrient-rich foods that offer beneficial nutrients and fewer calories.**
  Choose fruits and vegetables, whole and enriched grains, lean meats, beans and nuts, and low-fat and fat-free dairy foods more often.

- **Splurge sensibly.**
  Enjoy smaller amounts of the foods and drinks you love to satisfy your taste buds and avoid overdoing it.
“Fun stuff counts as exercise! Get active with family or friends, whether it’s soccer in the park, dancing to music or taking a walk in your neighborhood.”
“Fun stuff counts as exercise” is the most motivational of the six tested statements.

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The “Fun stuff counts as exercise” message is by far the most well received. Three-quarters of the group participants rate it as highly motivating. Millennials say this statement reminds them that simple, fun activities can be good for them, and makes them want to do more of what they are already doing.

The list of three activities helps Millennials connect the message to their own lives. Specifically, the examples appear to spur their thinking about the kinds of exercise or activity that they personally would find fun. The examples of dancing to music and taking a walk resonate for many. Others begin to think about activities as varied as kickball, Zumba, surfing, and paintball.

- It kind of makes me want to go out and do something. Like right now I'm thinking about my weekend or tomorrow night. I need to go out and shoot the ball around or something like that.—Male, Low Education, Little Rock
- It makes me want to join a Zumba class or something. Because with Zumba, you're dancing and sweating.—Female, Low Education, Little Rock
- With my family, my mom and my aunts, we do that every now and then. We'll walk out in the yard and we just walk back and forth or as long as we can. So we do that already and it would be nice if we did it more other than once or twice a month.—Female, Low Education, Little Rock

Several participants point out that this message changes their mindset about what exercise is. They ordinarily associate exercise with chore-like workouts at the gym, but this reminds them that exercise can be enjoyable. The idea that they can do something good for their body while doing something more enjoyable is motivating to them, and even alleviates self-doubt for a non-gym-goer.

- This correlates exercise to something that's exciting to you…You [usually] think of exercise and you think of tough work, the treadmill or something.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore
- It can influence you because you can have fun working out and exercising while having fun. It doesn't have to be so painful and like a drill sergeant.—Female, High Education, Little Rock
- Who wouldn't like to be playing with their friends and dancing and taking nice walks with their companion? It's a two for one. You're being healthy and you're enjoying your life.—Male, Low Education, Baltimore
- I don't enjoy going to the gym. I enjoy doing fun stuff…whether it's joining a women's league playing volleyball or flag football on Saturday…so [this tells me] I don't have to feel bad about not being that real big gym-goer.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore
It motivates by making exercise sound positive, fun, and achievable. It also encourages many to keep doing what they are already doing.

- Some of those who say the message is not highly motivating still find it positive in that it reinforces that they are on the right track, and several find it reassuring that that they can be active in a positive way. One woman summarizes it as "Every little bit counts." The message even spurs one participant to think about standing at his desk rather than sitting.

  I was actually supposed to play soccer tonight. So it makes me think of things that I already have planned. I'm going camping next weekend…For someone like me, it's more of a reassurance.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- However, others indicate that this statement is nothing new for them. One who already gets a lot of activity maintaining his land says this doesn’t move him. The same is true of a mother of an active four year old who says, "I don't need to do any more fun stuff."

- Likewise, it does not appeal to hard core exercisers, although they are clearly not the key target audience. One says, for example, that this is the "easy way out," and does not encourage the extra effort of working out.

  I walk all the time like just around campus and all of that. I guess it counts as exercise, but it never really feels like exercise to me…It never feels quite the same as when I really push myself to do like a real workout and make that the goal.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- Suggestions for improving this message include:
  - Listing "cooler" activities
  - Adding the word "remember" at the beginning
  - Addressing singles or people who like solo activity
  - Mentioning "sports" generally rather than soccer specifically
“Take charge of your weight. Balancing the calories you eat and drink with the calories you burn through physical activity puts you in control.”
“Taking charge of your weight” also resonates with Millennials.

This “take charge” statement stands solidly in second place in terms of the motivation it provides Millennials, with about half of finding it motivational.

Those who find it motivating say it reminds them they can take control of their weight, that they are not helpless.

It kind of reminds me that I’m not helpless…if you don’t really think about it and “Oh my gosh. I’m gaining weight and there’s nothing I can do about it. I don’t know what’s happening.” But it reminds me that I do have control over how much weight I gain.—Female, High Education, Little Rock

In addition, the message just makes intuitive sense to many Millennials, and it resonates with them. They say they know this is what they should be doing, so seeing this message is a good reminder.

Several point out that it is a plus that the message refers to drinking as well as eating, since beverages might otherwise be overlooked as a source of calories.

I just thought it was such a simple statement, but if you really think about it, it makes so much sense. You are not always calorie conscious about what you eat and drink, and therefore you obviously gain weight. But if one day you have more calories or you don’t have the healthiest day, it’s just smart to take that extra walk. I just thought it was a good statement.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

It’s important to put in there “and what you drink”…A lot of people forget that, other than water, things you drink do have calories in it.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

It’s a reminder that you forget about the beer you drank or the soda.—Male, High Education, Baltimore

A key motivational aspect of this message is that it gets people actively thinking about how to balance their caloric intake and their activity. They want to learn how to estimate the number of calories in certain foods and/or how much energy they burn in their activities. Some think about their own eating habits and what they could cut out or change.

It makes me want to go figure out to do that. Is there an app for these or how do I know how many calories and how much activity [things] like parking farther away and walking burn? How do I monitor that?—Female, Low Education, Little Rock

This talked to me a little bit more…don’t forget you can’t have that extra order of wings when you go out.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

It really makes me curious as to how I can figure out exactly how much I do burn with the activities that I do that maybe aren’t on a list of how to burn calories because most people nowadays don’t split firewood. That’s a lot of physical activity.—Male, High Education, Little Rock
Many like that this message is balanced in addressing both food and exercise.

- A couple young males appreciate that this message focuses on both calories and exercise, rather than just calories. One points out that discussing the balance between the two actually gives people a lot of flexibility in how to manage their weight.

  *Don't just look at calories; don't just look at exercise. Take them both into consideration. And that was the reason why I gave it a high grade…I think if you actually focus on two, that's the best way of living a healthy life.*—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  *It also reminds me that I can eat unhealthy at times, but I have to make sure I keep the physical activity going. So being able to go home and have some fried chicken. I wouldn't feel so guilty having that once in a while as long as I go to the gym and burn those calories off.*—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- One man says the message implies that a person who eats healthfully and watches what they eat would see results.

- The "straight to the point" quality of the message seems to one young man like something a trainer or motivational speaker in the fitness world might say.

- At the same time, the weakness of this message, in Millennials’ eyes, is that it focuses on calories and exercise to the exclusion of the other factors that are important to weight control. In particular, many complain that the message ignores the healthfulness of the foods one eats, and the fact that one's health is not solely dependent on one's weight.

  *You can eat a really small number of calories in a day, but not eat anything that is actually nutritious…People put too much emphasis on calories and not enough of the nutrients that you are actually getting from what you’re eating.*—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  *There’s other things than just calories that go into whether you’ll lose weight, and it’s also not just about losing weight…I know people at work who’ve been skinny their whole lives that have horrible health issues just because they’ve eaten horribly…and even though I’m overweight, I’m a healthier person physically.*—Male, High Education, Little Rock

  *I have an issue, just in general, with weight. I think it’s so much more about how you feel about yourself. If you feel good and energized every day and you like the way you look and it’s not creating adverse effects for you, then I don’t like [talking about] weight and counting calories.*—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- Some say they do not think about calories day-to-day and do not feel they need to. For those who are already trying to cut back on calories but not succeeding, this message could backfire and be de-motivating.

  *If you were struggling or something and somebody told you, “Take charge of your weight,” you’d be like, “But I’m trying already.”…It might be demotivating.*—Male, High Education, Baltimore
Just two recommendations emerge for improving this message.

- Participants feel this message could be improved by:
  - Mentioning healthful eating or nutrients rather than just calories, or possibly just "balancing what you eat and drink" instead of "balancing the calories you eat and drink"
  - Providing information, or links to information, about how many calories can be burned through particular activities as well as how many calories are in certain foods
“Splurge sensibly. Enjoy smaller amounts of the foods and drinks you love to satisfy your taste buds and avoid overdoing it.”
The message encouraging “Splurging sensibly” is less motivating, but is clear and speaks to Millennials.

This is one of three messages found motivating by about one-third of the focus group participants, and while eight out of ten rate it high on clarity, only about half say it speaks to them.

Three main reactions to this message are responsible for its middle-of-the-road ratings on motivation. First, several Millennials think the "splurge sensibly" message does not go beyond common sense, so they are not motivated by it.

“It’s something you already know. You know that if you’re trying to lose weight, you know not to overindulge in the things that you just love…You know not to overdo it.—Female, High Education, Little Rock

“It was just common sense. “Don’t be an idiot” is what a lot of this says.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

Secondly, some Millennials admit that lack of self-control is a key issue they face in trying to eat healthfully, so they do not believe they can follow the guidance offered in this statement, even if they felt motivated to try.

Probably my biggest problem is moderation. That’s what it is. It doesn’t motivate me because I have such a problem with that. I know that I could read this and this could be on billboards everywhere and I’d never be able to eat in moderation…If I have some candy and that candy is good, I’m going to eat that candy until there’s no more left in that bag. So it’s not motivating me—Female, Low Education, Baltimore

I don’t have the self-control for that.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

Third, some feel this statement does not distinguish between the different types of foods that one might splurge on. They are not clear if it would apply to foods and drinks that are more healthful.

It’s just vague…Maybe I eat healthy. Maybe I enjoy healthy things and why not more of those? I like fruit smoothies. Should I drink a lot less of those? That’s what this is saying.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

I would say to eat smaller amounts of foods and drink that you love that are not as healthy, and maybe make that a bit more clear, because you might love to eat broccoli or you might love to eat something that is actually healthy, and why should this tell you not to eat as much of that as you want.—Male, High Education, Baltimore

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At the same time, many appreciate the fact that this message does not encourage cutting out all foods that are less healthful.

On the other hand, a number of young consumers do respond positively to the message. In particular, several participants across different groups say they see “balance” in this message. They like the idea of finding a balance between feeling healthy and enjoying the foods and drinks they love.

That’s a positive message. It’s more balanced. It’s not saying to avoid all sugar and this and that. So it makes you feel good about eating healthy…It was balanced, positive, and it was more motivating.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

I think it’s more manageable…instead of cutting yourself off from having anything that you like…you just do it in moderation…like little treats and stuff like that. But not completely just taken out of your diet, because then you are going to binge on it at some point when you crave it.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

I think it was important that it gave you a choice…It’s like you could balance it out. It gives you that control to balance it out.—Male, Low Education, Baltimore

Along these lines, others like the fact that this message is positive; they are pleased that they can still have the things they like, just in smaller portions. One implies that this approach makes a diet seem more doable.

So many diets are like, “You can’t have this. No sugar. No carbs.” And [the message] does make me feel a little better…It’s kind of like you can have these things if you do it in small portions.—Female, High Education, Little Rock

Some also appreciate the simplicity of the message. They call it "short, sweet, and to the point," and it rings true to them. One mentions that "splurge sensibly" is a nice "catchphrase."

However, this message raises the question in the minds of some Millennials about how often one can or should “splurge sensibly.” They suggest that the message give some guidance on that.

For some young consumers, especially males, the word "splurge" does not resonate and is unclear. For example, one pictures someone who's splurging as eating a whole bucket of fried chicken.

The recommendations Millennials make to improve this message are to:

- Give an idea of how often one can splurge
- Somehow clarify that the splurging that needs moderation is not for ideal, healthful, nutritious, low calorie foods
“Know your number. Learning how many calories you should consume in a day is a critical first step in managing your weight.”
The statement encouraging Millennials to “know their number” is clear, but less motivating.

Roughly one-third of Millennials find this message to be motivating. Interestingly, it is motivational a larger share of male Millennials than females. It also tends to garner fairly high ratings for clarity.

The primary cause for the relatively low ratings is a sense that the statement seems incomplete to Millennials. Specifically, a number feel this message is too targeted on calories when managing one's weight involves other factors. They say the types of foods they consume are important, and that the amount of exercise is a consideration as well.

I think overall that's a fine statement, but I also think there is a component of exercising that goes along with it.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

I could easily stick to my number of calories per day, but I could eat a ton of sugar. A lot of times there is food that is okay in calories, but high in sugar or high in sodium… So I think it's just you balance in all nutrients, not just calories.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

I think there is also a component of what the calories should consist of… I'm a bigger believer of a balanced meal… eating more fruits and vegetables and protein… rather than counting your calories.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

Others point out that “knowing one's number” is not enough—weight loss requires the motivation to act on that number as well.

I know my number. I've looked it up before… My motivation usually changes by more inspirational things than the actual number.—Female, High Education, Little Rock

Usually it's more like a self-motivation thing. It's what I want to do. If I want to exercise and eat healthier and watch what I'm eating, I will. If I don't, I don't care.—Male, High Education, Little Rock

I personally know how many calories [to] eat, but that doesn't mean I would necessarily do that.—Female, High Education, Baltimore

The impact of the initial phrase, "Know your number," leaves some Millennials with a question in their mind. They are not sure what number is being referred to—their weight or the number of calories.

It does throw you off: “know your number.” I'm like [you need to] know how much you weigh? Know how many calories you need? It's like you have to continue to figure it out … it could be more specific.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore
Although it motivates some to find out what their number is, others simply do not like counting calories.

- The focus on a number—whether weight or calories—makes some uncomfortable. Those who are already struggling with their weight do not want to be thinking about a “number.”

  I just don’t like the first sentence, because I just have a negative association with the number and weight. I’m always worried about my weight.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- This message does spur some Millennials to want to know what their number is, but because the message does not give them one or tell them where to find it, they view it as incomplete.

  It says learn how many calories you should consume a day. Give a resource where to learn that, how to continue to check on that.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  Where it says “Know your number,” [it should] actually have the number…Because a lot of people don’t know how many calories they’re supposed to have a day…Putting that on there may be a little bit more motivational.—Male, Low Education, Baltimore

- Finally, a number of Millennials are just not concerned about counting calories, and a few others have tried counting calories before, but have found that they do not like doing it.

  I’m very active…So calories have never been a big concern for me.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  The message just doesn’t motivate me. I don’t think about calories at all. I probably should, but I don’t.—Female, Low Education, Baltimore

  To me it’s just not motivating because I’ve counted calories before and don’t like doing it. I’d rather look at whole grains or ingredients and wholeness rather than numbers and calories. It’s just not motivating.—Female, Low Education, Little Rock

- In spite of the various critiques of the message, there are some Millennials who like it. They find that this message offers a concrete way for them to take control and feel like they are doing something good for themselves. They believe that knowing their daily calorie number will help them manage their weight. One notes that it gives her a "starting point" on what she should be eating each day.

  It’s something I can actually look at and control. I can pay attention to how many calories I take in and I can control how many I take in within a day.—Female, High Education, Little Rock

  If you see that your intake is the amount of calories that you should take, it makes you feel like you’re doing…something worthwhile because you are working to be healthier.—Female, High Education, Little Rock

  Just learning how many calories you should have, you could possibly lose a lot of weight…If you do that [stick to your number] every day for five months, you could lose a few pounds and look better and feel better, instead of blowing past your number and still being the way you are.—Male, Low Education, Baltimore
Suggestions to improve the statement include providing typical daily calorie figures and referring more explicitly to losing weight.

As one might expect, those who are slim already generally do not feel this message is applicable to them.

*It comes across to me that it’s mostly for the people who have weight problems and are looking to lose weight.*—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

*I felt like it was a blanket statement. No matter who was reading it, it’s telling you learn your calories. Whether you’re the skinniest kid on the block or the person that’s overweight…It was just like a blanket that covered everybody.*—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

Suggestions for improving this message, explicit or implied, include:

- Providing an idea of the number of calories needed daily for a typical man or woman, or a link to find out this information easily
- Linking the calorie number to "losing" or "reducing" weight, rather than "managing" it
“Base your plate on nutrient-rich foods that offer beneficial nutrients and fewer calories. Choose fruits and vegetables, whole and enriched grains, lean meats, beans and nuts, and low-fat and fat-free dairy foods more often.”
Many Millennials feel the “Base your plate” message is too long and complicated to be motivating.

- This message is considered motivating by about one-third of Millennials, though it is receives fewer high ratings on clarity than other similarly-rated statements.

- One of the main reasons many Millennials do not like this message is that it is too long for them. They either begin to gloss over it before they are finished reading it, or they get confused by information overload.

  "To me it makes eating sound complicated."—Male, Low Education, Baltimore

  "You just lost me. There was just too much going on in that whole sentence."—Female, Low Education, Baltimore

- In addition, the descriptive nature of the message makes it more "drab" than "gripping." They say it is informational, but not motivational. A more positive or fun statement would be more appealing or motivational to them.

  "I just got bored…This just sounds very textbook to me…Some of the other stuff we read, the words they used, like "fun" and "enjoy" and stuff like that, made it seem more positive. So I felt more motivated to do those things."—Female, High Education, Baltimore

- The statement might also be more motivational if it made a link to a positive outcome. Without that, one participant does not understand what the purpose of the message is.

  "What is the message that they are trying to send?...I always want to know how are they beneficial?...If you do this, this is the potential result?"—Female, High Education, Little Rock

- Some young consumers say that they are not motivated by this message because they already know the information it is conveying. Women who are college grads are particularly likely to make this point.

  "It's not motivating to me because …I already know all those things. That doesn't motivate me to change."—Female, High Education, Little Rock

  "That is something that we all know what we should do, but it's just the part of doing it that's hard."—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- Several Millennials also claim they do not understand this message. A number do not know what foods would be nutrient-rich, and they do not seem to see the "choose fruits and vegetables, whole and enriched grains..." phrase as providing helpful examples.

  "What is a nutrient-rich food? What exactly am I looking for in a food?"—Female, High Education, Baltimore
On the other hand, some do like its educational approach and the way it tells them specifically how to eat more healthfully.

► Although the length of the message is a negative factor for many Millennials, others appreciate the amount of information and number of "options" it includes. One participant points out that she learned new information from this statement.

- It’s the first [tested statement] that actually says something that’s much more direct and it’s more measurable.—Male, High Education, Little Rock

- It gives you lots of things to choose from.—Female, High Education, Little Rock

- It gives you a lot more options because it’s laying it out there. Maybe lean meats and vegetables for this meal and beans and nuts for this meal and you mix in different things.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- I know about the whole grains, but the enriched grains and lean meats [is new information for me].—Female, Low Education, Little Rock

► The minority of Millennials who like this message appreciate its instructive nature. They like that it guides them in the right direction and gives them a brief roadmap toward being healthy.

- It is giving you a direction you can go in…this helps you focus on a more well-balanced diet. It gives you parameters.—Female, High Education, Little Rock

- It’s not saying you must do this and that…but [that] you [should] base your plate off of this. It’s like a step in the right direction.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- It breaks down everything that you should have to be healthy…it lays everything out for me.—Female, Low Education, Baltimore

► Perhaps because this message is so specific, a few participants think it is realistic and attainable.

► The most common suggestion for improving the message is to shorten it. A more explicit tie-in between the first and second sentences would also help many. Another way to improve it would be to link the suggested behavior directly to a positive result.
“Small steps = big changes. Serve smaller portions to help curb calories and keep your weight on the right track.”
The “small steps = big changes” message raises too many questions and does not address the variability in types and frequency of meals.

The "Small steps=big changes" statement receives the lowest ratings of any of the tested messages in terms of its motivation and ability to speak to the Millennial participants, primarily because it is lacking information in two key areas.

Many feel that the appropriate portion size for any individual is too variable for this message to be effective, while others believe that the ideal portion size varies with the healthfulness and type of food being consumed. For example, they say that even small portions of "bad" foods are unhealthful, while large portions of healthful foods such as vegetables may be a good practice.

- You could be eating a whole plate of vegetables, and you don’t really need a smaller portion of that.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore
- It doesn’t really describe what exactly you should eat smaller portions of.—Female, High Education, Baltimore
- Even if I’m eating small portions of bad things and all I eat are small portions of bad things, I’m still eating a bunch of bad things.—Female, High Education, Little Rock.

Second, Millennials say this message does not tell them enough about what a good portion size is for them to take action. One person emphasizes that the ideal portion size is different for different people.

- My question is, what do you consider a small portion? Your small portion might be different than my small portion. My small portion might be a Burger Delite glass plate. Then somebody else’s small portion might be…a half a cup of this and a quarter cup of that and two ounces of that.—Female, Low Education, Baltimore
- I’m 6’2” so what’s a small portion for me?...Not everybody is the same.—Male, Low Education, Baltimore

A few, especially men, also point out that a focus on portion size alone misses the fact that people can consume too much by eating too many times in a day.

- Smaller portions doesn’t mean that you’re not going to eat it more often.—Male, High Education, Little Rock
- Eating one double cheeseburger five times a day is terrible.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore
Some do not see portion reduction as a small step. However, for others, this message does offer a realistic, achievable goal.

- Another critique of this message is that eating smaller portions is not necessarily a small step. It has to be done consistently, and some young consumers are concerned that doing so will leave them hungry.

  - When I think of small steps, I think of things like...substituting one or two things in your diet each day for something that might be healthier... Every time you eat, make sure it's smaller—that doesn't feel like a small step to me.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  - If I had smaller portions, it wouldn't curb the calories, because I would just eat more later. I wouldn't be full.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  - I would never want to eat a smaller portion. I might not eat it all, but I wouldn't want to still be hungry.—Low Education, Baltimore

- This message grates on people in two separate focus groups because of what they perceive to be a advertising or sales tone. Along these lines, one participant feels this message sounds too demanding, like a "task" he should be doing.

  - For me, I can see how it could be a motivator, but it doesn't really translate to me, because I have seen so many commercials... this sounds like a slogan in the first sentence. I just feel like I'm being advertised to, and it turns me off.—Male, High Education, Baltimore

- On the positive side, the "Small steps = big changes" portion of this message makes it seem achievable to Millennials. One explains by saying that the word "steps" connotes actively changing what she does.

  - I liked the first statement, the changes part. I just feel like it makes it sound doable for everybody.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  - You might not get to the grocery store that day...or you might not get to the gym to burn off those calories. But you can always choose to eat a little bit less than you did before. So I think that is an obtainable daily practice that you can do.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

  - I also think the word "steps" correlates directly to activity instead of just instead of nutrition, because the second sentence is more about nutrition. But the word "steps" is changing what you do actively.—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore

- A small number say this message is right on target—either because they think eating smaller portions would, in fact, make a difference to them personally, or because the message reinforces efforts they are currently making.

  - I work 12-hour shifts, so I don't necessarily snack on vegetables or healthy things during the day. So when I eat dinner, I will eat so much food, just because I'm starving from the day. So I think it's important that you...have snack bags you bring to work or school...to help you to stay on track. It's just saying that you don't need to do something drastic. You don't need to cut out all carbs or cut out all sugars. You can just do positive things and not eat everything in sight when you're hungry.—High Education, Baltimore

  - I think it's something that I'm trying to work on...Making smaller meals allows you to have and serve smaller portions rather than making yourself full.—Male, Mixed Education, Baltimore
Simple changes could make this “Take charge” statement more motivating.

- Explicit or implied suggestions for improving this message include:
  - Adding the word "healthier" before "portions" or somehow clarifying how portion cutting should be done for foods at various points along a continuum of healthfulness (e.g., very small portions of the least healthful foods, but moderate portions of healthful foods)
  - Being more specific about what portion sizes would be appropriate, or possibly providing links to simple information about portion sizes
  - Making the tone more suggestion-like, such as "Try serving smaller portions and see how you feel"