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Survey: Nutrition Information Abounds, But Many Doubt Food Choices

IFIC Foundation 12th Annual Food and Health Survey Also Finds That a “Health Halo” Could Be Causing Flawed Food Decisions; Attitudes About Food Vary Widely by Age

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Americans are consuming food information from more sources than ever before, yet our nutritional literacy is sorely lacking—and our health may be suffering as a result. Those are among the findings of the International Food Information Council Foundation’s *12th Annual Food and Health Survey*.

“As in previous years, the Food and Health Survey has shown that Americans feel overwhelmed by conflicting food and nutrition information,” said IFIC Foundation CEO [Joseph Clayton](#). “But this year, we’re finding troubling signs that the information glut is translating into faulty decisions about our diets and health.”

“As policymakers work to revise the Nutrition Facts panel and define ‘healthy’ on food labels, it’s more crucial than ever before that we empower consumers with accurate information based on the best available science, in terms they can easily understand and put into action.”

Food Confusion

The vast majority of consumers—eight in 10 (**78 percent**)—say that they encounter a lot of conflicting information about what to eat/avoid. More than half of those (**56 percent**) say the conflicting information makes them doubt the choices they make.

Almost all consumers (**96 percent**) seek out health benefits from what they eat and drink (the top benefits being weight loss, cardiovascular health, energy, and digestive health), but out of those, only **45 percent** could identify a single food or nutrient associated with those benefits.

For example, while sources of omega-3 fatty acids such as fish oil can contribute to heart health, just **12 percent** made an association between them.

In addition, while people are interested in getting energy benefits, **less than 5 percent** could name caffeine as providing those benefits.

The “Social Network”: Family and Friends As Nutrition Advisers

So why are we confused? For one, despite their best intentions, the people we’re closest to might actually be leading us astray. In short, consumers paradoxically rely heavily on information from individuals—family and friends—for whom there is little trust.

About one in four consumers (**28 percent**) say they rely on friends and family for nutrition and food safety information, which tops other sources including conversations with Registered Dietitian Nutritionists, health-focused websites, and the news. But family and friends are much less trusted than other sources like conversations with Registered Dietitian Nutritionists and other personal healthcare professionals.

Meanwhile, **32 percent** rated family and friends as their top influencer on decisions about eating patterns or diets. Personal healthcare professionals were cited by **14 percent** of consumers, while all other sources rated only in the single digits. This discrepancy—those trusted vs. those relied on—adds to the confusing food information landscape we confront each day.

The Health Halo Effect

The *Food and Health Survey* also suggests that consumers might be paying too much or making flawed decisions about nutrition because of non-health factors—or mental shortcuts—that drastically alter our perception of what is healthful.

These factors include the form of the food (fresh, frozen, canned), place of purchase (e.g., convenience store vs. natural food store), the length of the ingredient list, and price, among others —and they drive perceptions of healthfulness even between two foods with identical nutrition information.

For example, even with nutritionally identical products, consumers are **almost five times as likely** to believe a fresh product is healthier than canned and **four times as likely** to believe a fresh product is healthier than frozen. Consumers also are more likely to believe a product that costs \$2 is healthier than an otherwise identical product that costs 99 cents.

For years, some influencers have driven home messages conflating nutrition with non-health values, and now consumers are paying the price—literally, or at the expense of other desired factors such as convenience or shelf life.

Boomers and Older Americans: The Health-Driven Generations

As people age, their nutrition needs and dietary preferences change. But few have examined the shopping habits and eating patterns of Americans ages 50-plus—the country’s fastest-growing demographic.

That’s why the IFIC Foundation, in collaboration with [AARP Foundation](#), conducted an oversample of respondents ages 50–80 for the *2017 Food and Health Survey* to help uncover insights into the diets and

health of older Americans.

Compared with other segments of the population, those age 50–80 ...

- ... **are more confident in their choices.** While 80 percent of all consumers say there's a lot of conflicting information about what to eat and what to avoid, only **47 percent** of those 50 – 80 say it makes them doubt the choices they make, compared to **61 percent** of those ages 18 – 49.
- ... **use fewer information sources when deciding which foods to eat or avoid.** Consumers age 50 – 80 also are less likely than millennials to use friends and family as a common information source (**40 percent vs. 23 percent**).
- ... **are more likely to adopt and maintain healthy eating behaviors.** Among the most significant differences, Americans age 50 – 80 are more likely than those age 18 – 49 to be:
 - Cutting back on foods higher in saturated fat more than younger Americans (**75 percent vs. 57 percent**)
 - Cutting back on foods higher in salt (**71 percent vs. 59 percent**)
 - Eating more foods with whole grains (**70 percent vs. 62 percent**)
 - Consuming smaller portions (**68 percent vs. 59 percent**)
 - Comparing sodium in various foods (**63 percent vs. 52 percent**)
 - Cutting back on full-fat dairy or replacing it with low- or no-fat alternatives (**60 percent vs. 50 percent**)
- ... **are more likely to be able to connect specific foods with the health benefits they seek.** Of those who named a desired benefit, **49 percent** of older Americans could associate it with a food or nutrient source, versus only **40 percent** of younger Americans.

Meanwhile, Americans' interest in getting weight-loss benefits from food and nutrients falls dramatically with age. Weight loss and management are far and away the most desired benefit, at **40 percent** among those 18 – 34 and **38 percent** from 35 – 49, but that drops to **23 percent** from age 50 – 64 and **28 percent** from 65 – 80.

The desire for foods and nutrients with cardiovascular benefits increases with age, from **11 percent** ages 35 – 49 to **23 percent** ages 50 – 64.

Confidence in the safety of the food supply increases significantly with age, with **55 percent** from 18 – 49 saying they're confident, **66 percent** from 50 – 64, and **76 percent** from 65 – 80.

Other Survey Highlights:

- If Americans had an extra four hours per week, **46 percent** would use that time to be physically active. That number is virtually tied with those who would spend more time with friends and family, while other priorities trail far behind.

- If Americans had an extra \$100 per month, **25 percent** say they would spend it on groceries—second only to “saving or investing” (**57 percent**) when given a list of priorities.
- Many Americans are overestimating their health status: While **59 percent** say their health is very good or excellent, **one-third** of those people are either overweight or obese.
- **About one in five (19 percent)** of Americans say they occasionally read scientific studies for information about what to eat and what to avoid. That’s slightly more than news articles or headlines (**17 percent**) and also ahead of sources such as health or fitness professionals on TV or social media, bloggers, food companies, and government agencies.
- Products’ brand names ranked last among factors that impact our food and beverage purchasing decisions. From a list of six factors, **35 percent** said that brand was a driver of their purchases, behind taste (**84 percent**), price (**66 percent**), healthfulness (**63 percent**), convenience (**49 percent**), and sustainability (**38 percent**).
- Consumers overwhelmingly shop for food at supermarkets (**80 percent**), followed by super-stores (**45 percent**), warehouse/discount clubs (**35 percent**), farmers’ markets (**19 percent**), natural foods stores (**17 percent**), convenience stores (**14 percent**), and drug stores (**11 percent**).
- About six in 10 (**58 percent**) of consumers use nutrition information at least sometimes to decide what to have when eating away from home.
- Topping the list of specific components considered to be healthful by consumers is vitamin D (**88 percent**), followed by fiber (**87 percent**), whole grains (**84 percent**), protein from plant sources (**72 percent**), and omega-3 fatty acids (**71 percent**).
- **Six in 10 (61 percent)** Americans are at least somewhat confident in the safety of the food supply, down from **66 percent** in 2016 but unchanged from 2015 (**61 percent**).

Methodology

The results are derived from an online survey of 1,002 Americans ages 18 – 80, conducted March 10 to March 29, 2017. Results were weighted to ensure that they are reflective of the American population, as seen in the 2016 Current Population Survey. Specifically, they were weighted by age, education, gender, race/ethnicity, and region. The survey was conducted by Greenwald & Associates, using ResearchNow’s consumer panel.

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The mission of International Food Information Council Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, is to effectively communicate science-based information on health, food safety and nutrition for the public good. The IFIC

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