



INTERNATIONAL
FOOD INFORMATION
COUNCIL FOUNDATION

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE: 8 a.m. EDT, Sept. 18, 2019

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Consumers Strongly Believe Both Animal- and Plant-Based Diets Can Be Sustainable; Leftovers, Fresh Produce Are Wasted Far More Often Than Meat, Dairy Products

IFIC Foundation Releases Surveys on Environmental Sustainability and Food Waste at “Future of Food Summit” in New York City

(New York City)—Environmental sustainability and food waste are top-of-mind for many consumers, but there are sharp differences of beliefs and behaviors between different groups, according to a new pair of surveys by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation.

The IFIC Foundation today released two studies—[A Survey of Consumers’ Attitudes and Perceptions of Environmentally Sustainable and Healthy Diets](#) and [A Survey of Consumer Behaviors & Perceptions of Food Waste](#)—at the [Future of Food Summit](#), co-hosted by Meredith Corp.’s *EatingWell* in New York City.

“Technology, an increasing focus on health and wellness, and consumers’ desires to empower and inform their food decisions are transforming food production and our diets,” said Joseph Clayton, CEO of the IFIC Foundation.

“The Future of Food Summit explores how we can address these changes and channel our knowledge in order to improve the food system and food choices. The IFIC Foundation’s new research is meant to supplement those goals and add to our understanding of consumer attitudes and behaviors,” he added.

“Findings from these two studies complement the topics and themes covered at the Future of Food Summit,” said Jessie Price, Editor-in-Chief of *EatingWell*.

“IFIC Foundation’s consumer research is a valuable tool to help inform important issues in the food and health space such as sustainability and food waste. And we are thrilled to partner with them for this event,” Price said.

The Future of Food Summit brings together thought leaders across academia, agriculture, manufacturing, retail and the media to discuss the future of food and how our food system needs to change for the better. Topics included “The Consumer Experience—Shopping, Cooking & Restaurants,”

“Sustainable Food Production,” “Plants to Animals: Where Is Our Protein Obsession Headed?” and “Innovations in Nutrition & Health,” with a keynote address by Ali Bouzari, PhD, co-founder of Pilot R&D and Render.

Environmentally Sustainable Diets Survey

Last spring, the IFIC Foundation’s [14th annual Food and Health Survey](#) found that **54%** of consumers say it’s at least somewhat important that the products they buy be produced in an environmentally sustainable way. The Foundation conducted today’s follow-up survey to drill down on attitudes and behaviors.

Interestingly, when asked which aspects of an environmentally sustainable diet are important to consumers, “what I eat is healthy for the planet” was the top response, followed by “what I eat is nutritious.” Other factors—such as ingredients people know and recognize, foods that are produced using fewer natural resources, and foods with recyclable packaging—lagged behind.

Among those for whom “healthy for the planet” was a top answer, men outnumbered women (**15%** vs. **8%**) and college graduates outnumbered non-college graduates (**17%** vs. **8%**), while, conversely, people from the Midwest were far less likely to choose that response (just **5%**) than other regions (**9%** in the South, **15%** in the Northeast and **17%** in the West).

Two-thirds (**66%**) of consumers think an environmentally sustainable diet can include protein from both animal sources *and* plant-based sources, while only **10%** disagreed. But there was an education gap in the responses, with **73%** of college graduates agreeing vs. **62%** of non-graduates.

Nonetheless, animal-based proteins dominate our diets, with **92%** of respondents report consuming protein from animal sources like meat, dairy, eggs and seafood. Age influences protein consumption: Consumers under 45 years are less likely to consume animal proteins (**88%**), while those 65 and older are much more likely to do so (**98%**).

On the other hand, nearly three-quarters (**72%**) of respondents report consuming protein from plant sources. But here too there was an education gap, with **80%** of college graduates saying they consume plant-based proteins vs. **66%** of non-college graduates. Taste was far and away the most important factor behind those dietary choices, cited as the top reason of **81%** of those who consume animal proteins and by **73%** of those who eat plant-based proteins.

When people were asked how much of each source of protein they would need to consume to eat an environmentally sustainable diet, the responses varied: Only one-quarter (**27%**) said they would need to consume more plant-based protein, while **38%** said such a diet would require the same amount of plant protein, and **11%** said it would require less.

When it comes to animal protein, one-quarter (**26%**) said they would need to consume less to attain an environmentally sustainable and healthy diet, while half (**53%**) said it would require the same amount or *more* protein from animal sources.

Consumers were also asked what comes to mind when they think of environmentally sustainable animal protein. “No added hormones” topped the list at **50%**, followed by “grass-fed animals” (**40%**) and “locally raised” (**32%**). Just **21%** of respondents associated animals that were fed an organic diet with environmentally sustainable animal protein.

“Environmental sustainability is clearly on the mind of many consumers, but sometimes in ways we might not expect,” Clayton said. “For instance, some consider nutritious food or recognizable ingredients as part of an environmentally sustainable diet.

“The findings also suggest that consumers believe that animal- and plant-based diets can co-exist as sustainable options—particularly in the United States.”

Food Waste Survey

Food waste is considered one of the more pressing human health and sustainability issues of our time, with the United Nations estimating that fully [one-third](#) of food produced never reaches a human mouth.

When asked to choose the top three types of food that most often end up in the garbage, **74%** of consumers discarded leftovers of foods prepared at home, **67%** threw out fresh produce and **50%** tossed leftovers from restaurants. No other foods—including meats, eggs or dairy products, or shelf-stable items—were reported to be wasted by more than **27%**. Women were far more likely than men to throw out meal leftovers from home (**78%** vs. **68%**).

So why does food get wasted at home? In a question that asked consumers to choose their top two reasons, eighty-three percent reported spoiled or stale food as the most common reason foods ended up in the trash, followed by cleaning out the pantry (**49%**) and others in the household who simply didn’t want to eat the foods (**28%**). In terms of where we make food choices, food waste is always on the mind of **34%** of consumers while grocery shopping, **28%** while eating at home and **19%** while eating out.

Hispanic/Latinx consumers (**47%**), those under 45 years old (**45%**) and people in the Northeast (**44%**) were more likely than other groups to always think about food waste while grocery shopping, with similar demographic results when eating at home or eating out.

Financial considerations are the main reason people think about food waste, no matter the location, with “reducing the amount of money spent” cited by **42%** while grocery shopping, **35%** when eating out and **32%** when eating at home. Age correlates with these responses while grocery shopping, with **45%** of those under 45 years old citing the money they spend as their top food-waste consideration, but only

32% of those 65 and older offered the same response. Similar splits exist for those eating at home or eating out.

Many consumers report ways they try to reduce food waste: **60%** store their foods to maximize shelf life, **54%** keep their pantries organized, **51%** make grocery lists and **48%** make meal plans. Among those who eat out, **62%** take leftovers home, **47%** order small meals and **33%** share their meals. Women are far more likely than men to make a grocery list (**58%** vs. **43%**).

“Food waste isn’t just an environmental or health issue; it’s a moral imperative,” Clayton said. “About 800 million people around the world still go hungry every night, with many more who are undernourished. The more we can understand about attitudes and behaviors around food waste, the more progress we can make toward solving this arduous problem.”

Methodology

“A Survey of Consumers’ Attitudes and Perceptions of Environmentally Sustainable and Healthy Diets” interviewed 1,000 adults 18 years and older from June 11 and 12, 2019, and was weighted to ensure proportional results. It had a margin of error of 3.1% at a 95% confidence level. “A Survey of Consumer Behaviors & Perceptions of Food Waste” employed the same methodology and was conducted Aug. 13 and 14, 2019.

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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 Foundation is supported primarily by the broad-based food, beverage and agricultural industries. Visit <http://www.foodinsight.org>.