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Contact: Megan Meyer
202-296-6531
meyer@ific.org

COVID-19 Pandemic Transforms the Way We Shop, Eat and Think About Food, According to IFIC's 2020 Food & Health Survey

Survey Also Tracked Trends over Past Decade; Recent Diet Trends, Plant Protein Consumption and Sustainability Interest

(Washington, D.C.)—If the COVID-19 pandemic has had big impacts on how you're eating, shopping for food and thinking about food you're far from alone. According to the International Food Information Council's (IFIC) *2020 Food & Health Survey*, 85% of Americans have made at least some change in the food they eat or how they prepare it because of the coronavirus pandemic.

With the dawn of the new decade, the 2020 edition of the survey—marking the 15th consecutive year IFIC has examined consumer perceptions, beliefs and behaviors around food and nutrition—also looked back on trends from the past 10 years. Long-term trends indicate a growing emphasis on the healthfulness of our diets—while in the shorter term, the number of Americans who are following a diet or are concerned about environmental sustainability continues to increase.

COVID-19 Is Having Sweeping Impacts on Eating, Purchasing of Food

COVID-19 has also upended almost every aspect of our daily lives, not the least of which includes our eating and food-purchasing habits. Among the 85% who have made any change, the biggest—far and away—is that 60% of Americans report cooking at home more. Respondents also say they are snacking more (32%), washing fresh produce more often (30%) and thinking about food more than usual (27%). At the same time, a [separate IFIC survey](#) in [May](#) found substantial erosion in our risk-reduction practices during and after grocery shopping, compared to [April](#), in areas such as hand-washing after trips to the grocery store, minimizing contact with surfaces and using wipes and hand sanitizer. “Whether these particular impacts of the pandemic are only temporary remains to be seen,” said Joseph Clayton, president and CEO of IFIC. “But it’s hard to think of another recent event that has had such far-reaching effects, and in such a short period, on how we purchase, prepare and consume foods and beverages.”

Pandemic Also Fundamentally Alters Notions of Food Safety

Worries about the coronavirus are also reflected in big changes to our views of food safety. While overall confidence in the safety of the U.S. food supply is virtually unchanged (67% in 2020 versus 68% in

2019), food handling and preparation related to coronavirus risk are now at the top of the list of food safety concerns. COVID-19 was the top food safety issue for 24% of Americans, a debut that corresponded with a decline in concerns since 2019 over the top four food safety issues apart from COVID-19: foodborne illness, chemicals in food, carcinogens in food and pesticides/pesticide residues.

Where Americans purchase and consume their food has a big influence on how concerned they are about food safety. For instance, nearly half (49%) of consumers are at least somewhat concerned about the safety of food that was prepared outside their homes, such as takeout or delivery. A similar number (46%) are concerned when they eat outside the home, such as in restaurants. Trailing behind are those who are concerned about food safety when shopping for groceries online (42%), shopping for groceries in-store (36%) and preparing meals at home (30%).

The Parent Trap: Homebound Habits

It might come as little surprise that parents with children under 18—many of whom are stuck at home juggling Zoom meetings and antsy kids—have seen their food concerns and routines disrupted by COVID-19: 43% of them are concerned about in-person grocery shopping versus 33% of those without children under 18, and 41% of parents are snacking more as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, compared to 29% of non-parents.

Parents are also more likely to “eat their feelings,” with 33% saying they are more likely to eat when they are feeling emotional (versus 16% without children), and they are also less likely to feel satisfied by their food. And perhaps not surprisingly, over one quarter (26%) of parents report consuming caffeine with lunch, compared to 15% of those without children.

But there are also other notable differences between those with kids and those without them. For instance, parents of children under 18 tend to be more pessimistic about our future diets than those without children under 18 (22% believe our diets will be generally worse versus 12% of people without children under 18).

Hindsight Is 2020 (Compared to 2010, That Is)

The *2020 Food & Health Survey* also provides an opportunity to examine some of the more significant trends in food attitudes and behaviors since 2010. The factors with the most influence on our food-purchasing decisions, tracked by the survey, have remained relatively stable over the past decade, with taste consistently dominating the list, followed by price, healthfulness, convenience and sustainability (specified as “environmental sustainability” since last year).

More recently, the impact of environmental sustainability on food purchases jumped significantly—to 34% in 2020 from 27% last year. A [variety of other IFIC data](#) in recent years has shown widespread interest in sustainability, as it relates to the food system. Still, 63% say it is hard to know whether their food choices are environmentally sustainable.

Attitudes toward health have also changed in the past decade. More than half (54%) of all consumers say the healthfulness of their food choices matters more now than it did in 2010. For many, the aging process itself may play a large role in this transition, exemplified by the fact that 63% of people age 50 and up indicate that healthfulness has more of an impact now, compared to 46% of those under 50 who say the same. In addition, 58% of respondents say their overall health has more emphasis on their food

decisions now than a decade ago, while 53% say their weight has more emphasis on those decisions than it did in 2010.

However, when asked what they saw as the biggest changes in an average American's diet since 2010, 24% cited greater amounts of fast food and eating out, followed by more processed food (20%). Lagging far behind were healthier food options (including organic) at 12%, more sugar in diets (11%), overeating/unhealthy portion sizes (10%) and more dieting (10%).

Shifting Attitudes Toward Diets

An increasing focus on healthfulness over the past 10 years may be linked to a growing number of people who say that they're following a specific diet – some of which fall squarely in the category of “food fads,” while some have evidence-based staying power. In 2020, 43% say they have followed a specific diet or eating pattern within the past year, an increase from 38% in 2019, with intermittent fasting (10%), clean eating (9%), ketogenic or high-fat (8%) and low-carb (7%) diets being the most popular. The top motivators for new diets are losing weight (47%), feeling better and having more energy (40%), improving physical appearance (39%), protecting long-term health and preventing future health concerns (37%) and preventing weight gain (36%).

When looking at specific foods, consumption of protein from plant sources, plant-based meat and dairy alternatives increased in the past year, with 28% eating more protein from plant sources, 24% eating more plant-based dairy and 17% eating more plant-based meat alternatives than in 2019. Those following a specific diet or eating pattern are huge drivers of these numbers: 41% of those consumers say they increased consumption of protein from plant sources (versus 18% of those not following a diet) and 28% say they eat more plant-based meat alternatives (versus just 9%). The significant increase in plant-based options may be tied to a health halo associated with them: More than four in 10 consumers (43%) would assume that a product described as “plant-based” would be healthier than one that is not, even if it had the exact same Nutrition Facts label.

Fewer Americans are avoiding sugars this year, although it is still a very common practice: 74% are trying to avoid or limit sugars, compared to 80% in 2019. The top ways they are doing so is by drinking water instead of caloric beverages (60%) and limiting consumption of certain foods and beverages (42%). The most popular reasons people avoid sugars include not wanting extra calories (46%), believing that sugar is unhealthy (42%) and thinking it helps them lose or maintain weight (40%).

Discovering the Dietary Guidelines

Aligned with an increased emphasis on healthfulness comes rising awareness of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) over the past 10 years. In 2010, just 23% of consumers said they were familiar with the Guidelines. This year that number stands at 41%, a dramatic increase. Unfortunately, there is a huge gap in awareness by health and education status: 49% in excellent/very good health know at least a fair amount about the DGA versus just 29% who are in poorer health; 47% of consumers with a college degree know at least a fair amount about the DGA versus 37% with less than a college degree.

Overall familiarity with the [MyPlate](#) food-guidance graphic has also increased from 2019: 45% know a lot or a fair amount about it, compared to 38% in 2019. Younger consumers (62% of those age 18 to 34) are more familiar with MyPlate than those who are 35 and older (37%), while parents of children

under age 18 (59%) are more familiar than those without kids (39%). These shifts are particularly significant given that the process of developing the DGA for 2020–2025 is currently underway.

Methodology

The results are derived from an online survey of 1,011 Americans ages 18 – 80, conducted April 8 to April 16, 2020. Results were weighted by age, education, gender, race/ethnicity and region to ensure that they are reflective of the American population, as seen in the 2019 Current Population Survey. The survey was conducted by Greenwald & Associates, using Dynata’s panel.

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