

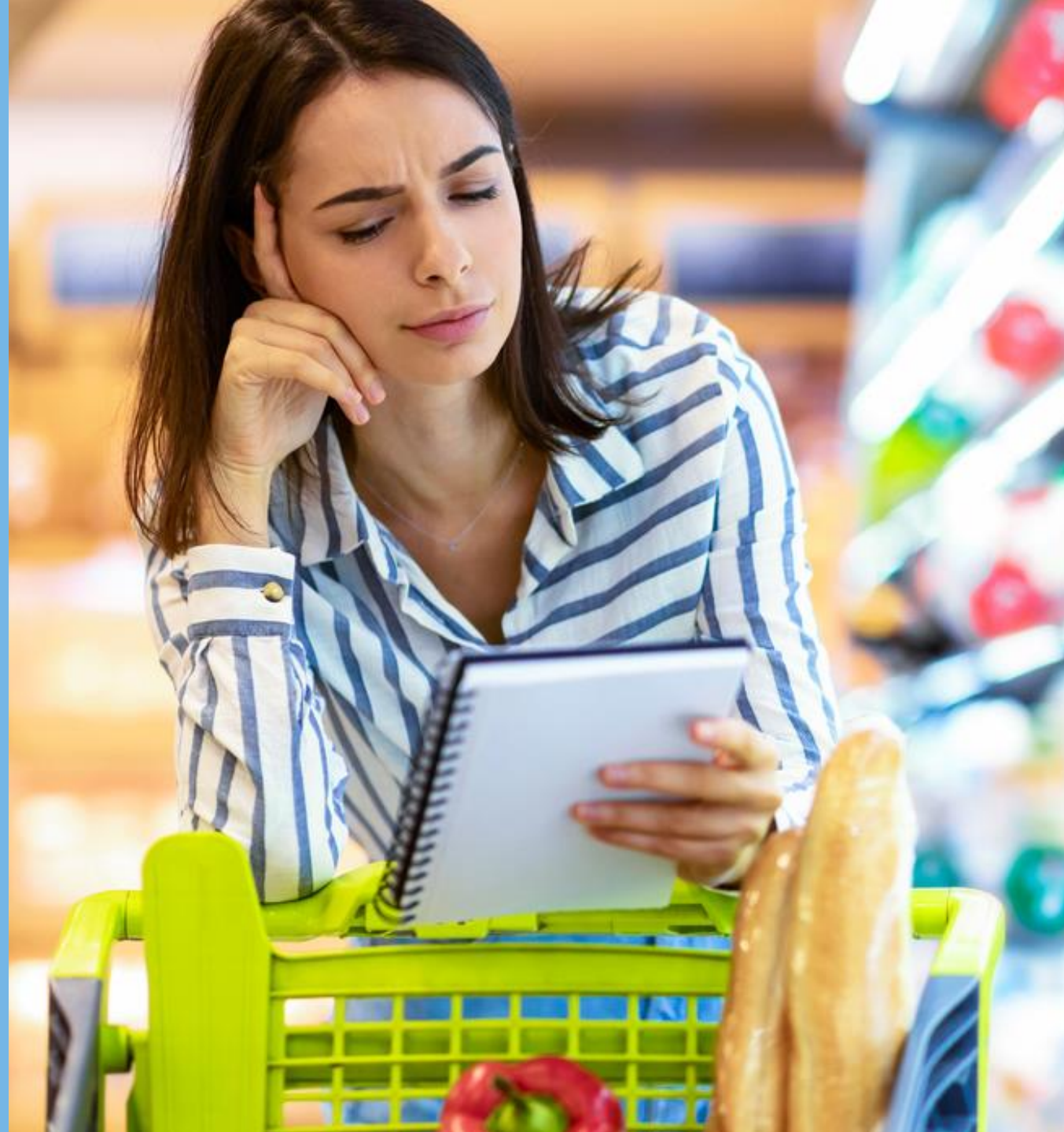


International
Food Information
Council

Consumer Survey: Public Perceptions Of Processed Foods In A Healthy Diet

JANUARY 2024

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METHODOLOGY

The International Food Information Council (IFIC) commissioned an online research survey with consumers based in the US to measure knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about processed foods.

One thousand adults aged 18+ years completed the survey from July 5-6, 2023, and responses were weighted to ensure proportional results. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding. The Bayesian confidence level for 1,000 interviews is 3.5, which is roughly equivalent to a margin of error of ± 3.1 at the 95% confidence level.

Statistically significant call-out boxes are included where appropriate on the data slides. Something is statistically significant if the result cannot be attributed to random chance. Statistical significance in this presentation should be compared within each demographic group (e.g. age, race, gender, etc.).

Executive Summary



Interest in processed foods has increased significantly in recent years, gaining attention from a range of sectors, including public health to pop culture.

- Specifically, researchers have begun studying the potential health implications of processed foods consumption utilizing food classification systems, such as [Nova](#), which categorize foods into various categories based on their level of processing.
- The U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee is also reviewing the currently available scientific evidence regarding potential implications associated with ultra-processed foods consumption on various health outcomes.
- Media outlets often portray processed foods as a public health threat and have begun admonishing consumers to avoid them.

Amidst the emerging evidence, classification systems, and headlines, current scientific consensus and the consumer perspective are often excluded from the dialogue.

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Americans Say Eating More Fruits And Vegetables, Followed By Balance, Variety & Moderation, Are Top Actions They Can Take To Eat Healthier.

Prioritizing a healthy diet is important for most Americans (84%); when asked which actions they could take to eat healthier, consumers recognize the benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables (33%) and resonate with key healthy-eating themes, like balance, variety, and moderation (27%). Reduction approaches such as eating less sugar (24%) and eating smaller portions (18%) were close behind. Eighteen percent also said eating fewer processed foods is an action they could take to eat healthier.

Consumers Use Certain Phrases or (Lack of) Ingredients To Determine The Healthfulness Of A Food.

While shopping in a supermarket and looking at packaged foods, Americans use certain words or phrases to help them determine a food's healthfulness. Top consumer responses to determine if a food is healthy include "no artificial ingredients" (34%) and "no additives" (26%) followed by "organic" (22%) as well as "no added sugar" and "natural" (both at 19%).

Consumers Believe A Wide Variety Of Foods, Including Processed Foods, Fit Into A Healthy Diet.

Many Americans agree that a wide variety of foods, several of which would be included on the spectrum of processed foods utilizing classification systems from the scientific literature, can fit into a healthy diet. For example, nearly two-thirds believe frozen broccoli (64%) and frozen berries (62%) have a place in a healthy diet, while 60% say the same for vanilla Greek yogurt, and 55% say canned tuna can fit. Fewer Americans reported items such as jarred salsa (15%) and chocolate milk (14%) can fit into a healthy diet.

Consumers Purchase Packaged Foods For Many Reasons.

While just more than half of Americans (53%) believe processed foods fit into a healthy diet, many consumers report multiple reasons for purchasing packaged foods. When asking consumers why they buy packaged foods, ease of preparation (33%), taste (32%), and longer storage (29%) were the most common responses. Twenty percent of consumers surveyed report purchasing these foods because they are nutritious or healthy.

Despite Eating Processed Foods, The Majority Of Americans Report That They Do Not Fully Understand What A Processed Food Is.

More than half of Americans (53%) believe processed foods can be part of a healthy diet; another 1 in 5 are not sure. A majority (69%) report eating processed foods at least some of the time; very few (4%) say they never eat them.

Among those who say eating a healthy diet is *very important* to them personally, 15% report consuming processed foods a lot of the time; 44% some of the time, 34% rarely, 6% never, and 2% report that they do not know. Among those who say eating a healthy diet is *somewhat important* to them, 16% eat processed foods a lot of the time, 59% some of the time, 20% rarely, 4% never, and 1% do not know. Among people who say eating a healthy diet is *neither important nor unimportant* to you personally, 29% consume processed foods a lot of the time, 51% eat processed foods some of the time, 14% rarely, 2% never, and 4% do not know. Among those who say eating a healthy diet is *not at all important* to you personally, 40% say they consume processed foods a lot of the time, 37% some of the time, 17% rarely, 2% never, 5% do not know.

Regardless of reported consumption, more than 7 in 10 Americans say they do not fully understand or could explain what a processed food is.

International Food Information Council (IFIC) research found that most consumers believe some processed foods can fit into a healthy diet and report eating some processed foods.

Still, most consumers acknowledge that they do not fully understand or cannot fully explain what a processed food is, indicating a need for further research and science communications to advance the dialogue regarding processed foods' role in healthy dietary patterns.

Implications

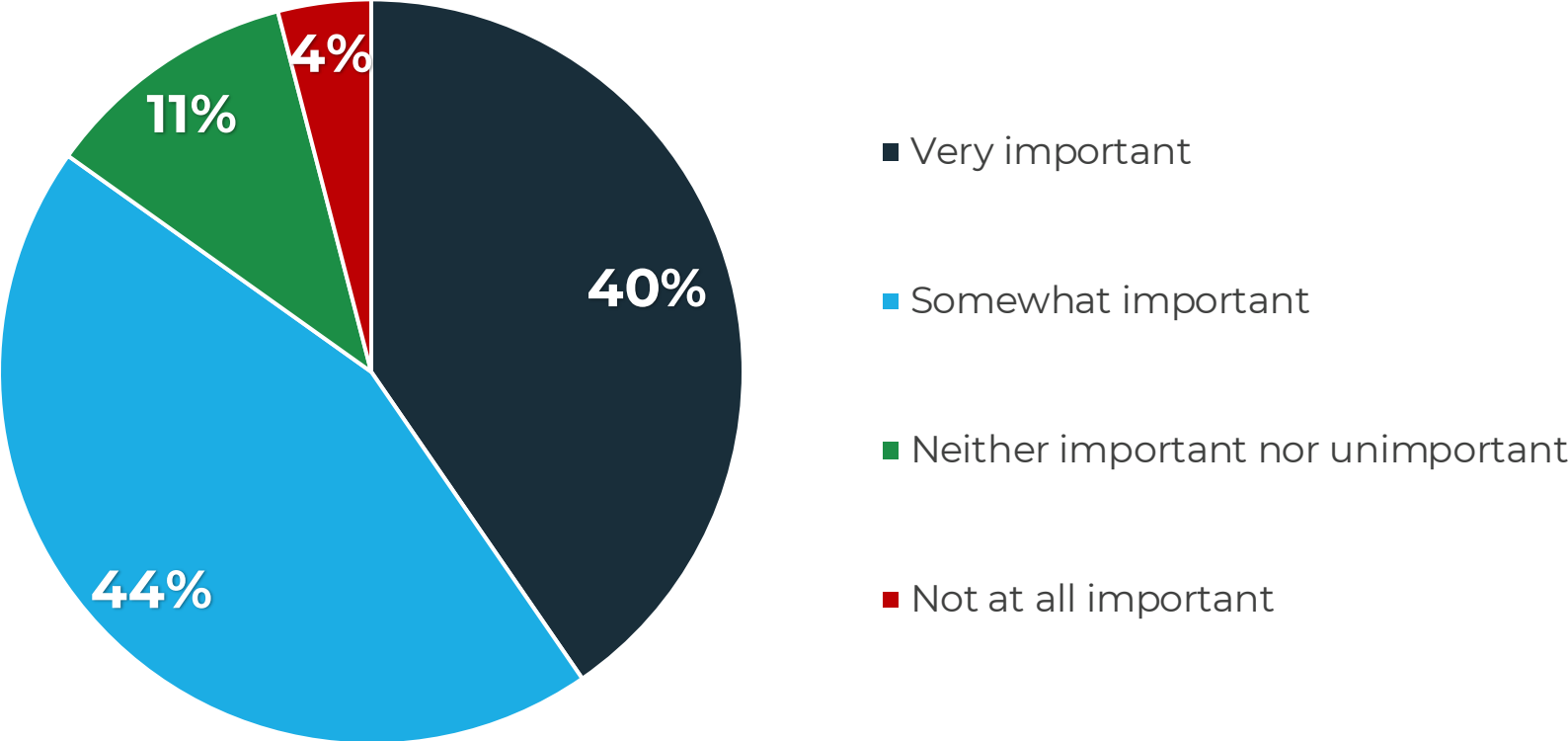


- Federal agencies, academic institutions, and health professionals in the U.S., and globally, desire to communicate science-based food, nutrition, and health messages that resonate with their patient, client, and consumer audiences and inspire positive action.
- IFIC's latest consumer survey demonstrates that consumers want to eat healthfully yet lack a firm understanding of processed foods and how they may fit or enhance their diet.
- This may, in part, be due to increased communications admonishing processed food given recent scientific studies that classify foods based on the level of processing and potential health implications versus linking nutrition content and/or other food attributes to health outcomes.
- As scientific research evolves, the consumer perspective is the cornerstone to communicating relevant recommendations.
- Gaps in consumer understanding demonstrate that further research and corresponding science communications are necessary to advance the dialogue concerning potential health implications associated with processed foods.

More than 8 in 10 say eating a healthy diet is important to them

1 in 10 are ambivalent about eating healthy

Those making \$80+k and those with a college degree are more likely to say "Very Important."

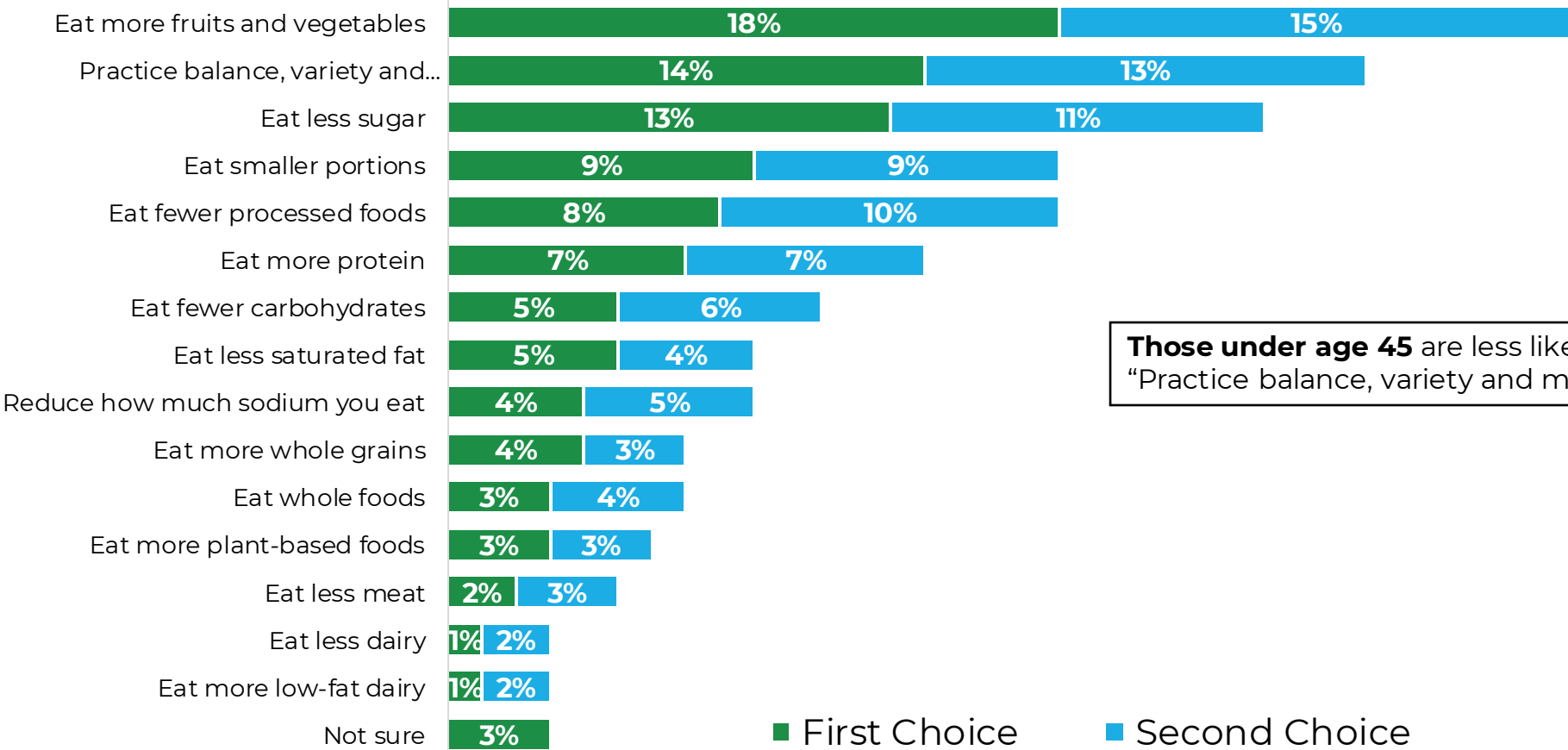


Q1. How important is eating a healthy diet to you personally?

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

Eating more fruits/veggies viewed as most important to eat healthier

Balance, variety, and moderation are also seen as critical practices for improving diet



Those under age 45 are less likely to say “Practice balance, variety and moderation.”

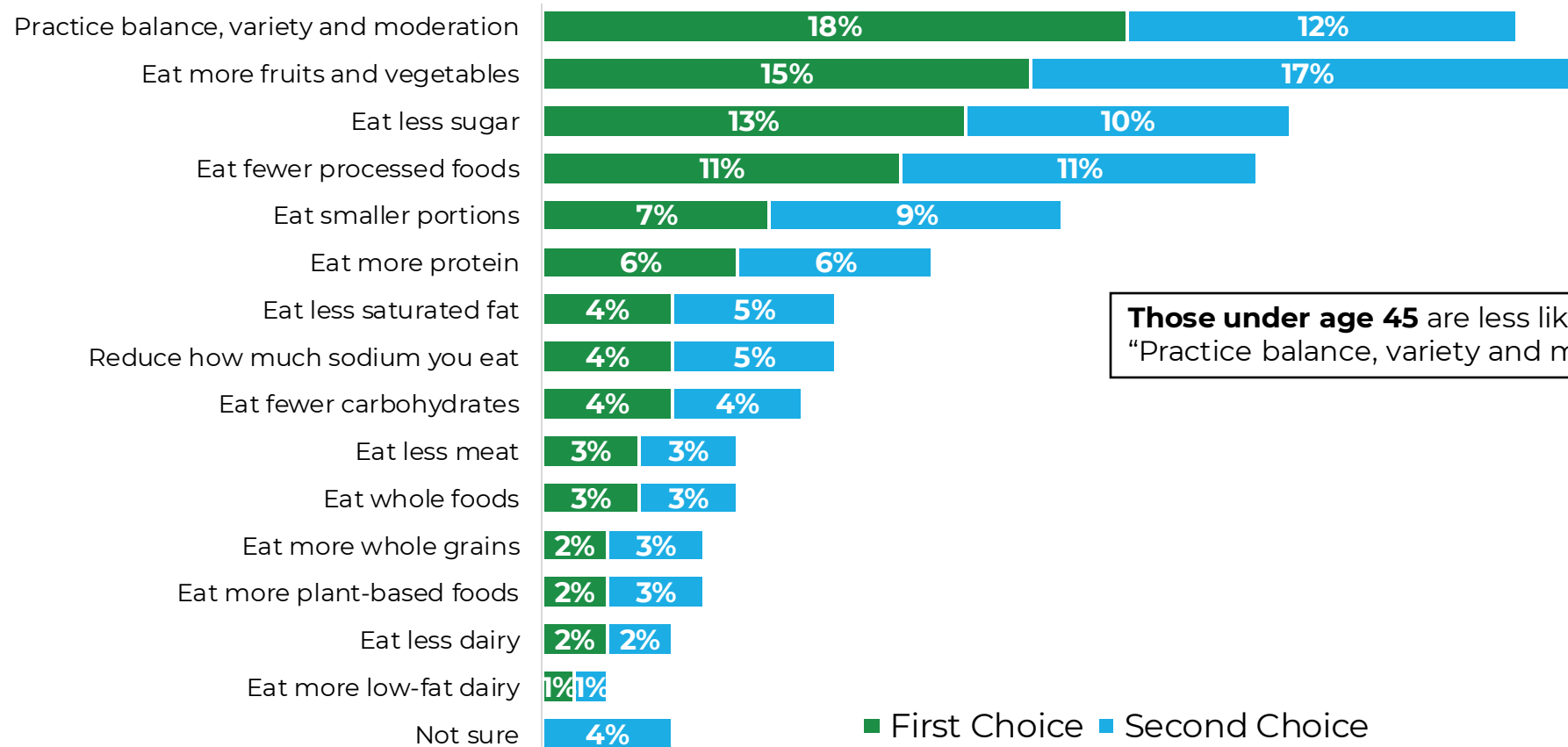
Q2. What do you believe are the most important actions you can take to eat healthier? Select top 2, with 1 being the most important.

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods



The first piece of dietary advice Americans would give to family or friends is to practice balance, variety, and moderation

Eating more fruits and vegetables ranks highly as well



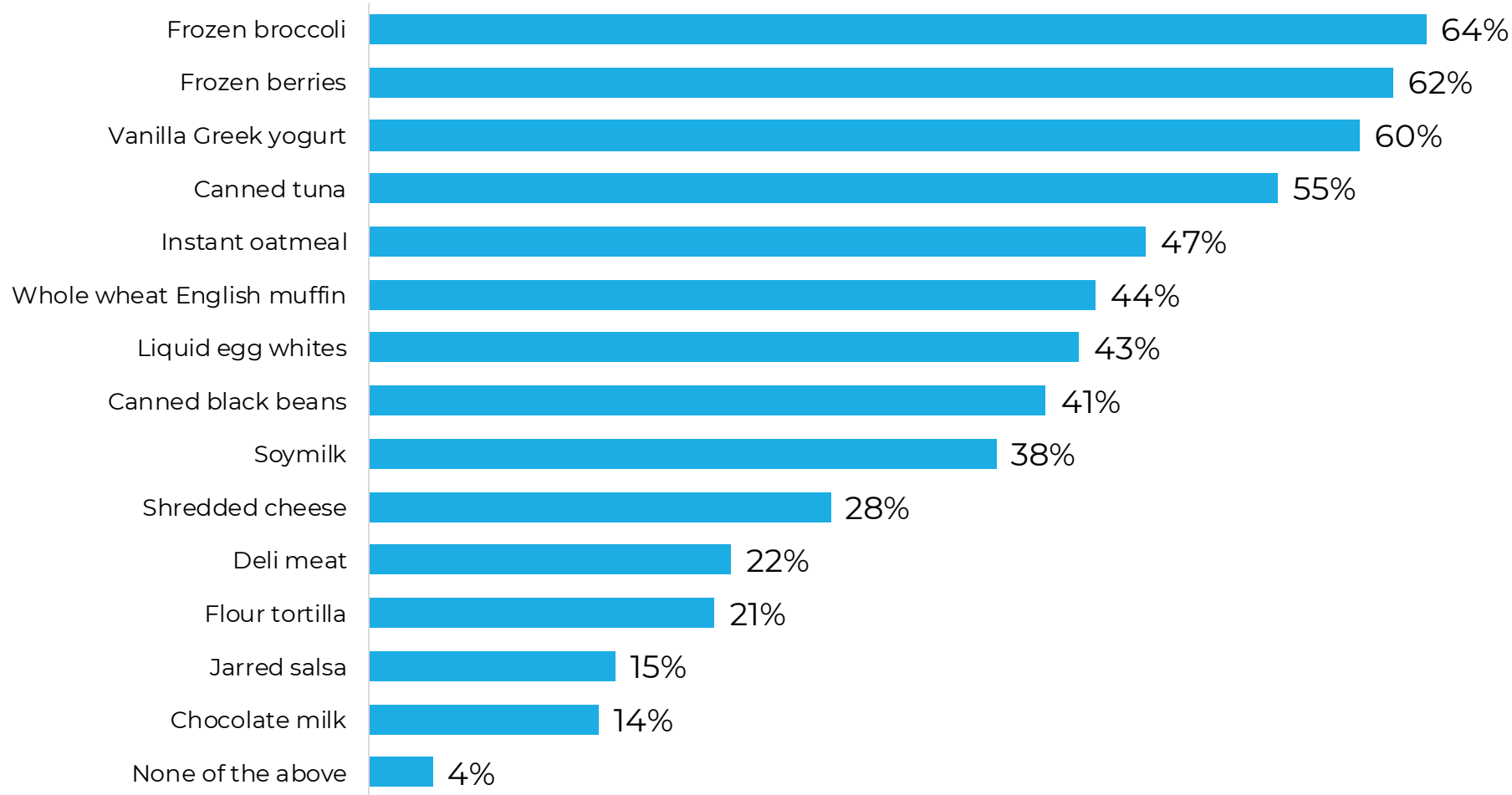
Those under age 45 are less likely to say "Practice balance, variety and moderation."

Q3. Imagine your family member or friend seeks your advice on how to eat healthy. What are the most important actions you would tell your family or friend to take? Select top 2, with 1 being the most important.

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

Americans believe a variety of processed foods can fit into a healthy diet

Fewer believe chocolate milk, salsa, tortillas, and deli meat fit into a healthy diet

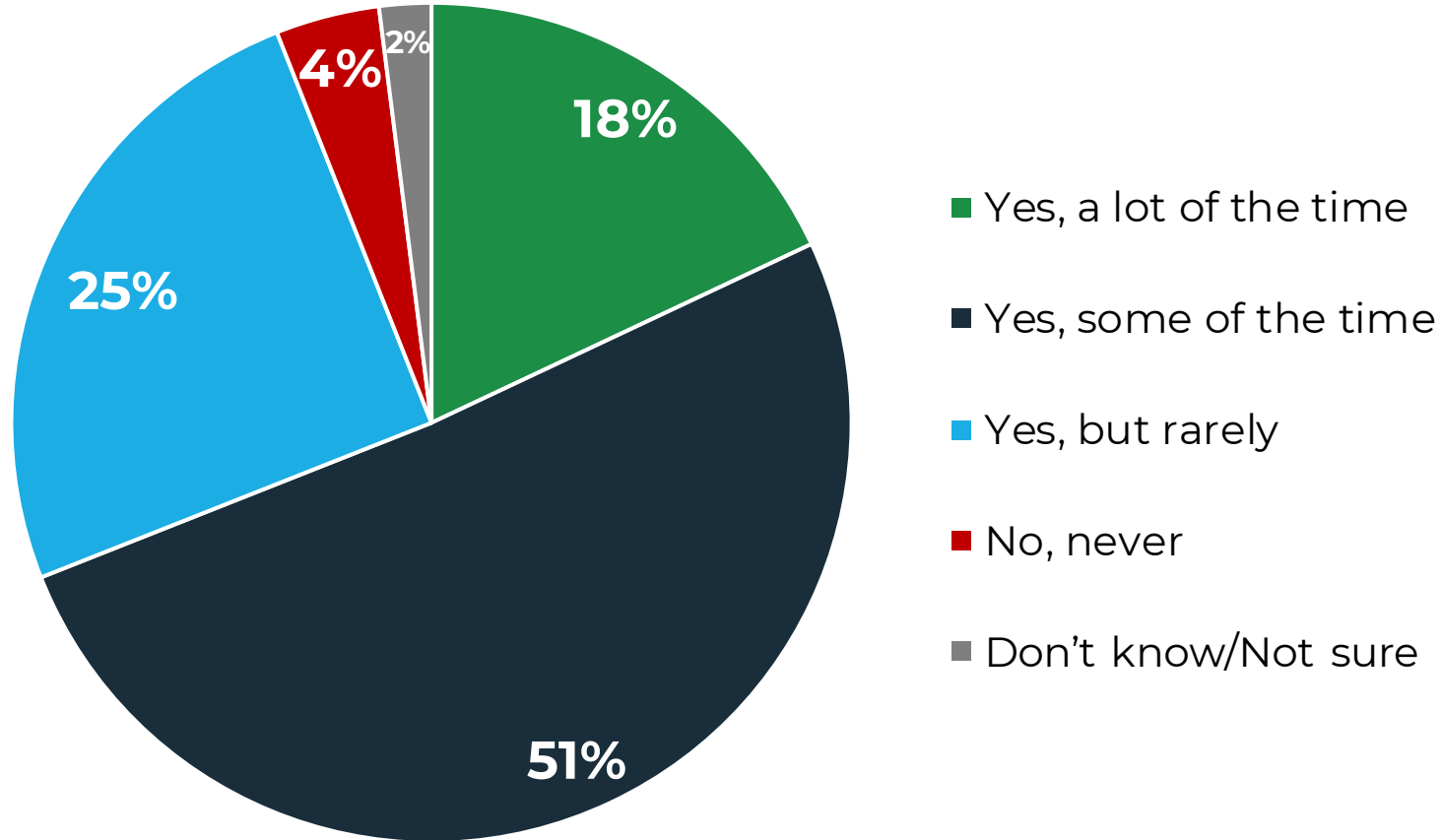


Q4. Using your best judgment select which foods you think can fit into a healthy diet. Select all that apply

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

Very few Americans say they never eat processed foods

More than 3 in 4 say they eat them at least some of the time



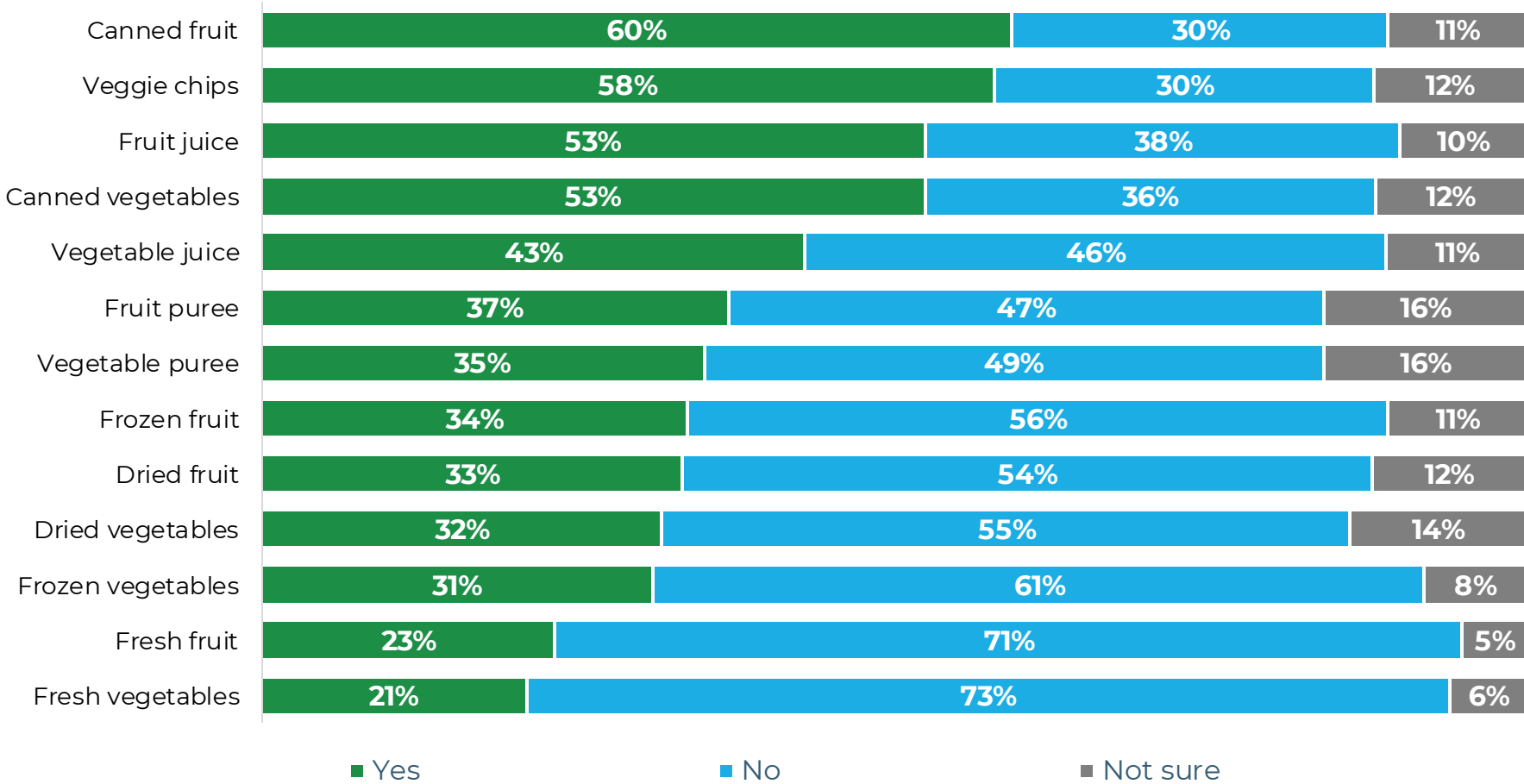
Those under age 45 are more likely to say "Yes, a lot of the time" when asked if they consume processed foods.

Q5. In general, do you consume processed foods?

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

More than half do not consider fresh, frozen, or dried forms of fruits and vegetables to be processed foods

Canned fruits and vegetables are more likely than other forms to be perceived as processed



Those under age 45 are more likely to consider fresh fruits and vegetables as processed.

Those age 65+ are less likely to consider fruits and vegetables as processed.

Q6. Please review the list of fruit and vegetable foods below. Using your best judgment, select yes, no or not sure for each of the categories listed below.

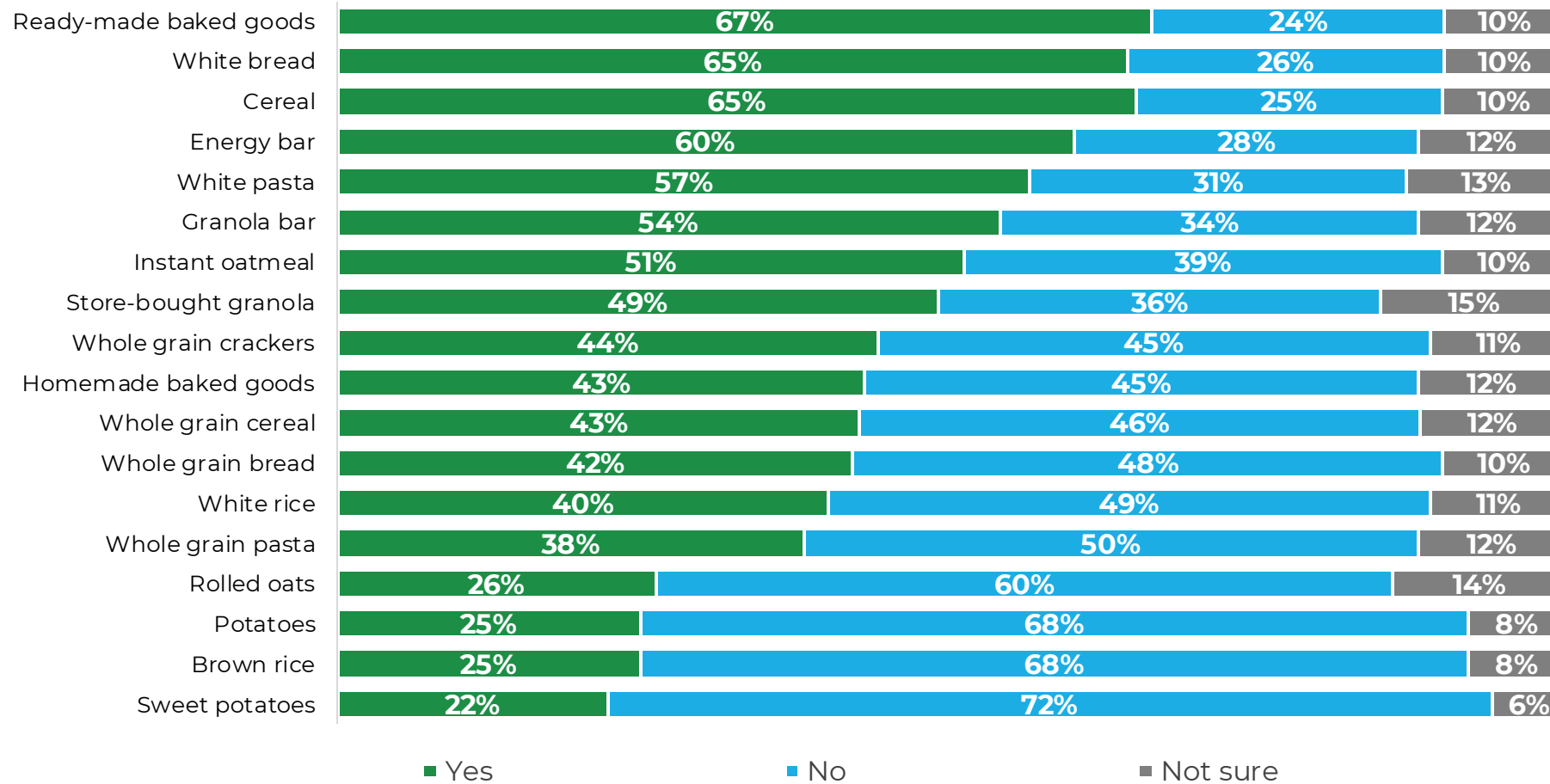
Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods



I would consider this a processed food.

2 in 3 consider ready-made baked goods, white bread, and cereal to be processed foods

Americans are split on granola bars, instant oatmeal, and store-bought granola



Those under age 45 are more likely to consider potatoes and sweet potatoes as processed.

Q7. Please review the list of carbohydrate foods below. Using your best judgment, select yes, no or not sure for each of the categories listed below.

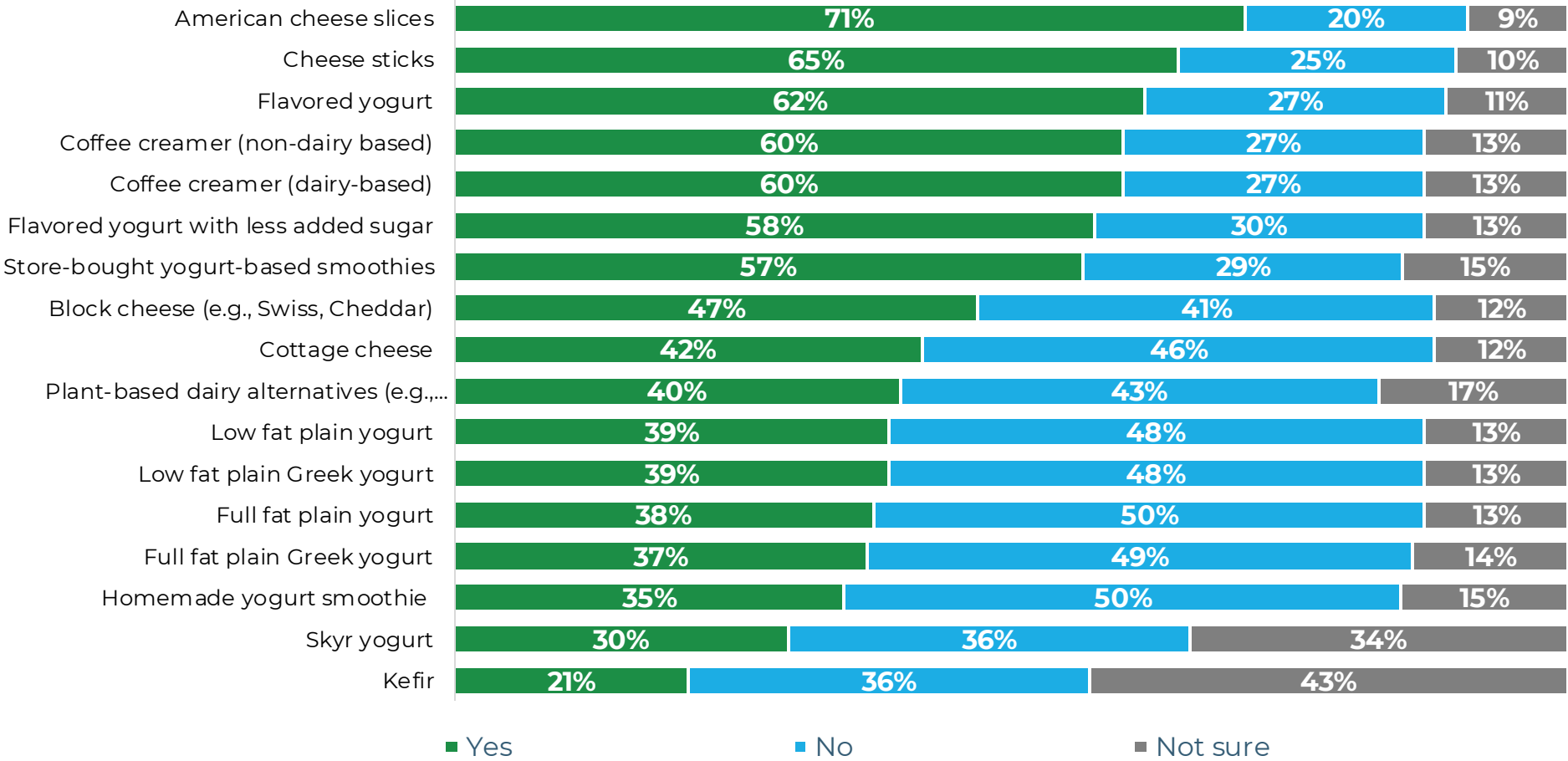
Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods



I would consider this a processed food.

Cheeses are more likely to be considered a processed food compared to many yogurt varieties

Kefir, skyr, homemade yogurt smoothies, and plain yogurts are less likely to be perceived as processed



Those under age 45 and those making \$80k+ are more likely to consider kefir as processed.

Q8. Please review the list of dairy foods below. Using your best judgment, select yes, no or not sure for each of the categories listed below.

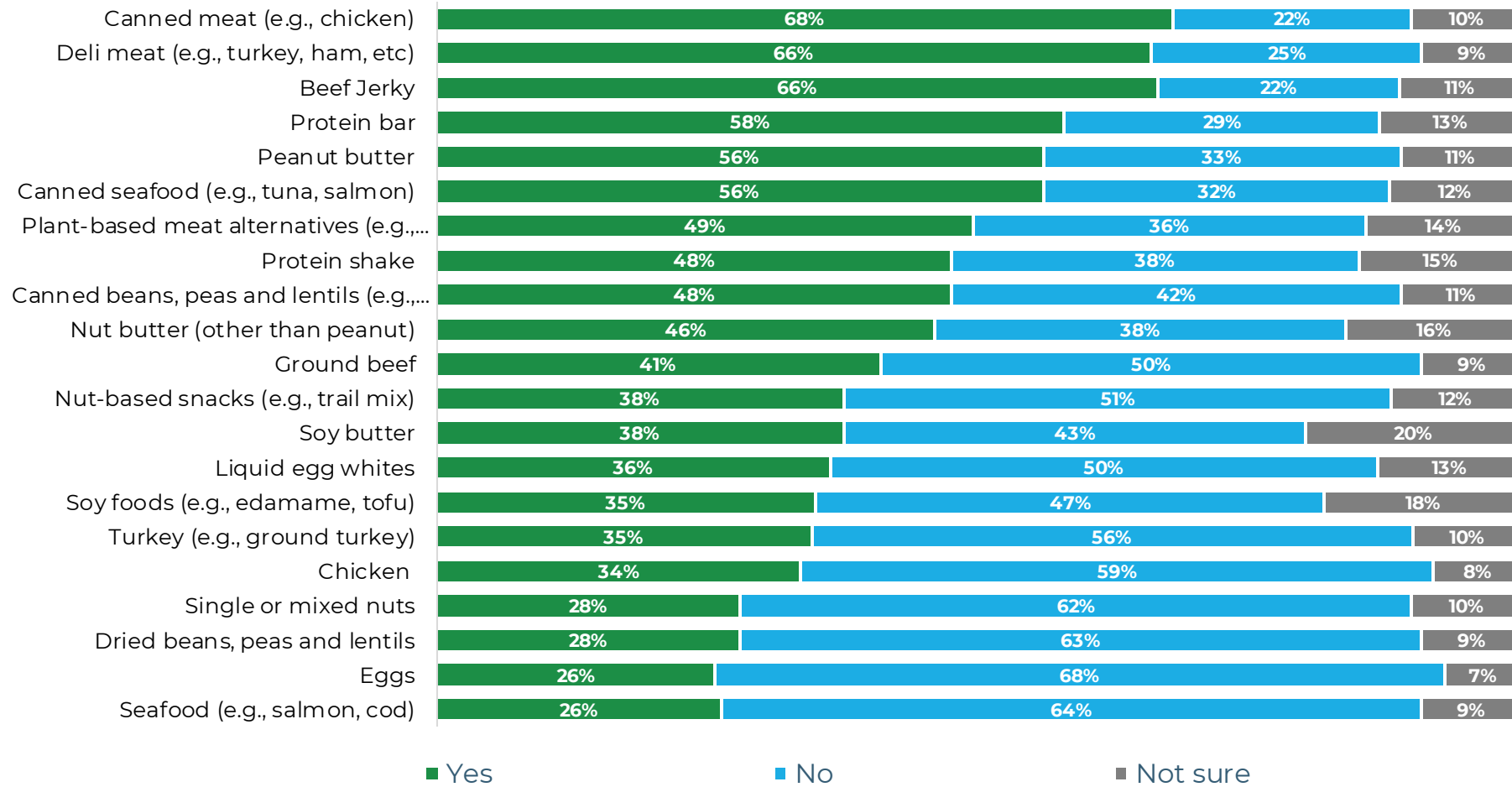
Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods



I would consider this a processed food.

Canned meat, deli meat, and beef jerky are protein foods most likely to be considered a processed food

Americans are nearly split on plant-based meat alternatives, protein shakes, canned pulses, and nut butters



Those under age 45 are more likely to consider seafood, dried legumes, and eggs as processed.

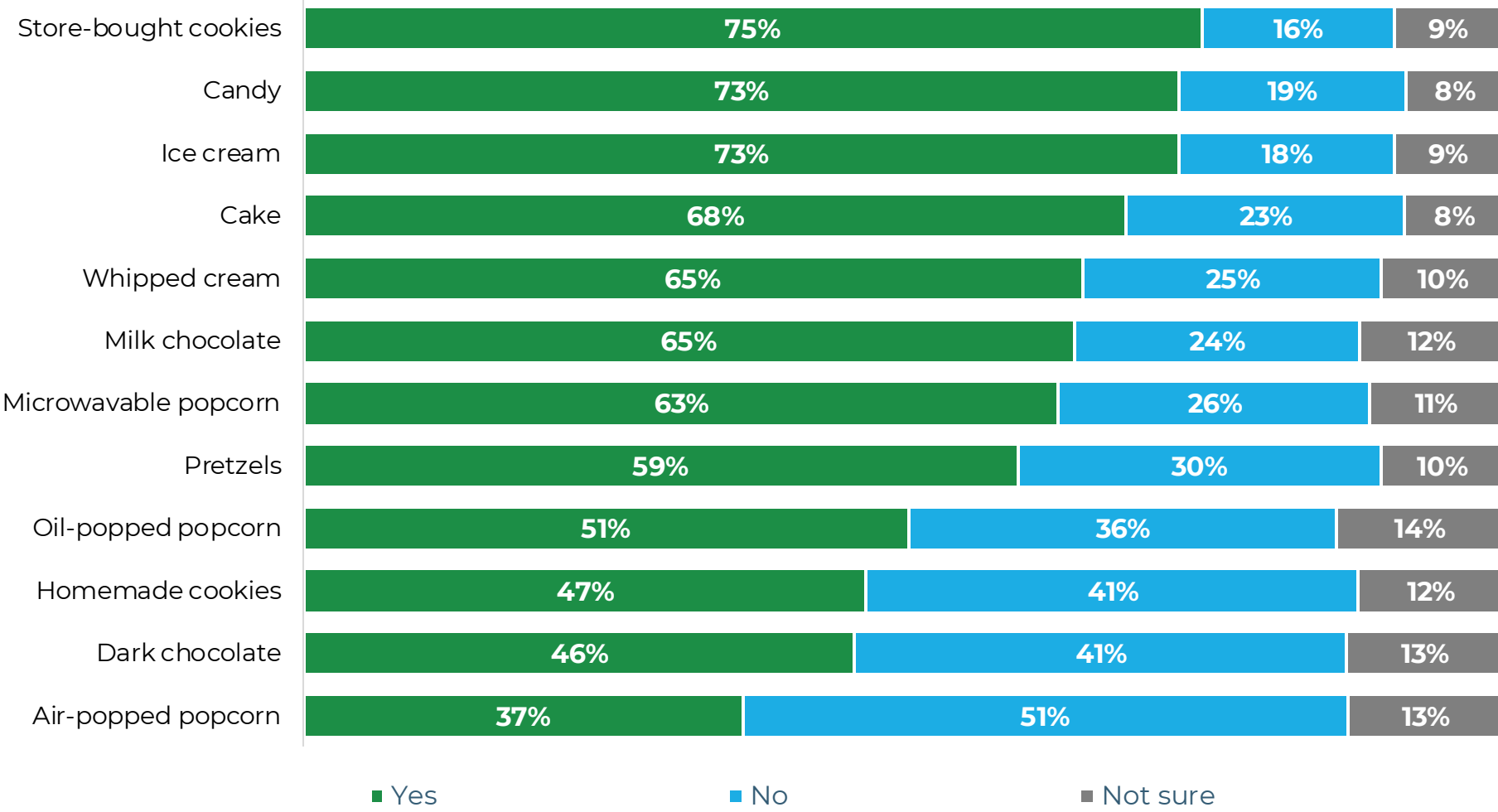
Q9. Please review the list of protein foods below. Using your best judgment, select yes, no or not sure for each of the categories listed below.

I would consider this a processed food.

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

Most dessert and snack foods are considered to be a processed food

Americans differ in their perception of store-bought and homemade cookies; milk and dark chocolate



Q10. Please review the list of snack and/or dessert-type foods below. Using your best judgment, select yes, no or not sure for each of the categories listed below.

I would consider this a processed food.

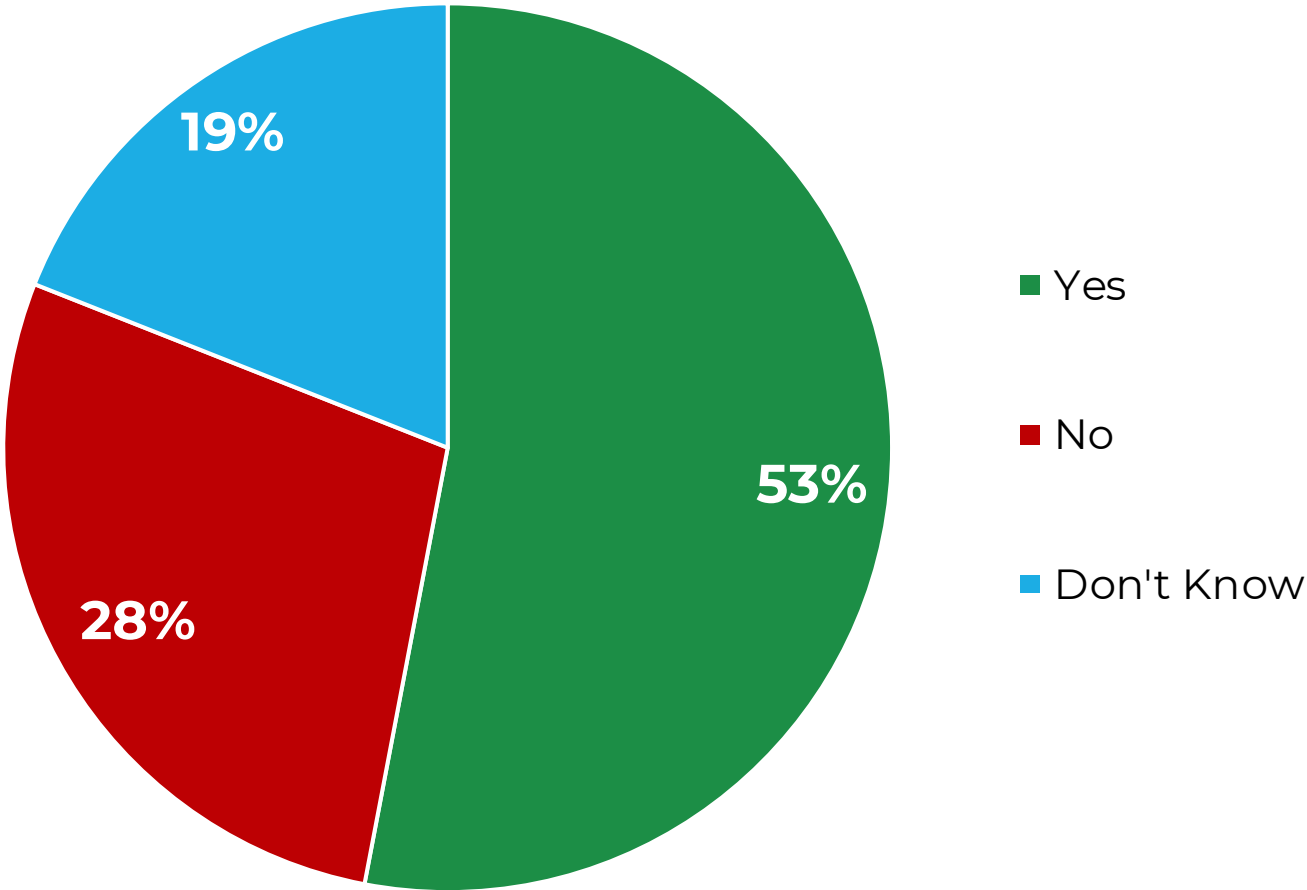
Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods



More than half believe processed foods can be part of a healthy diet

More than 1 in 4 do not believe processed foods can be part of a healthy diet

Respondents who identified as White are more likely to believe that processed foods can be part of a healthy diet.



Q11. In general, do you believe that processed foods can be part of a healthy diet?

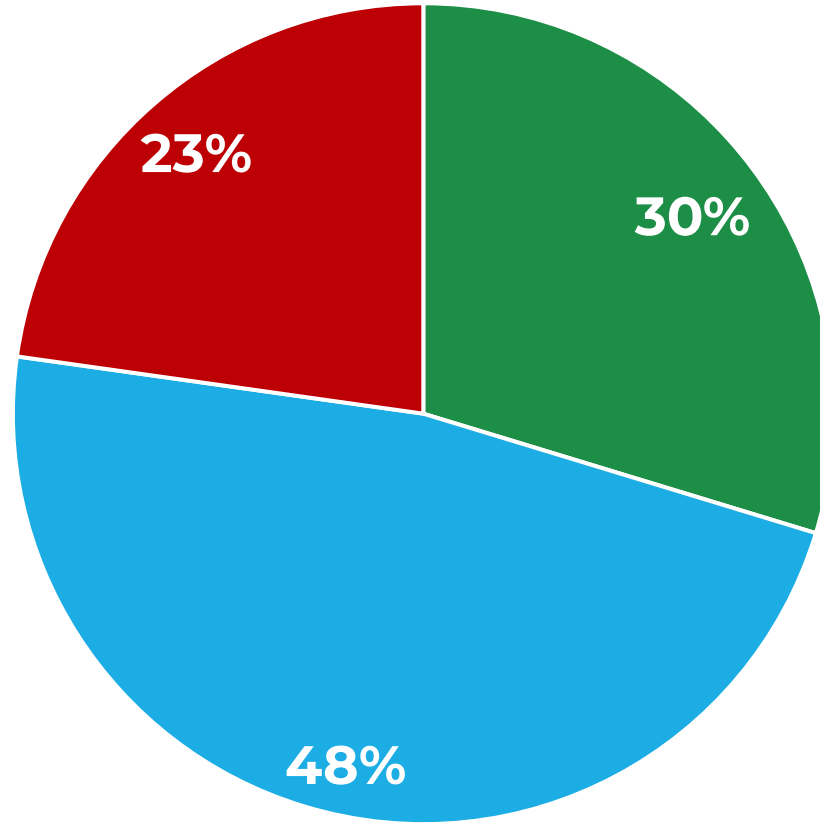
Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

7 in 10 are unsure if they fully understand what a processed food is

Those with a college degree are more likely to say they could explain it clearly

Those age 65+ and those without a college degree are less likely to say "Yes, I could explain it clearly."

Those making less than \$40k and those without a college degree are more likely to say "No, I don't think I could explain it."



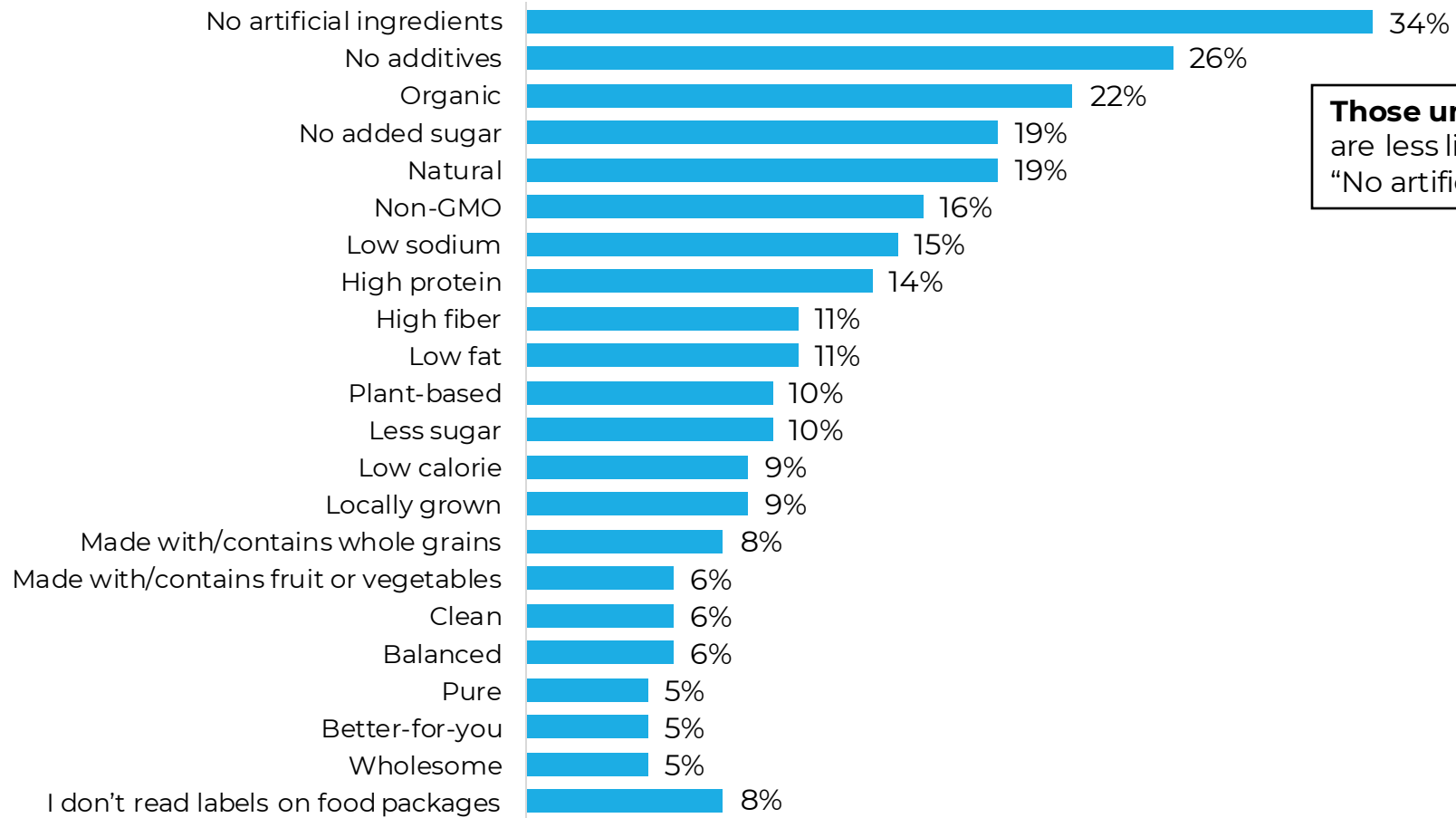
- Yes, I could explain it clearly
- Yes, but I'm not sure I fully understand what it is
- No, I don't think I could explain it

Q12. Do you feel you could explain to a friend or family member what a processed food is?
Select the best response.

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

“No artificial ingredients” and “no additives” are top label indicators of a food’s healthfulness

Fewer than 1 in 10 say they do not read labels on food packaging



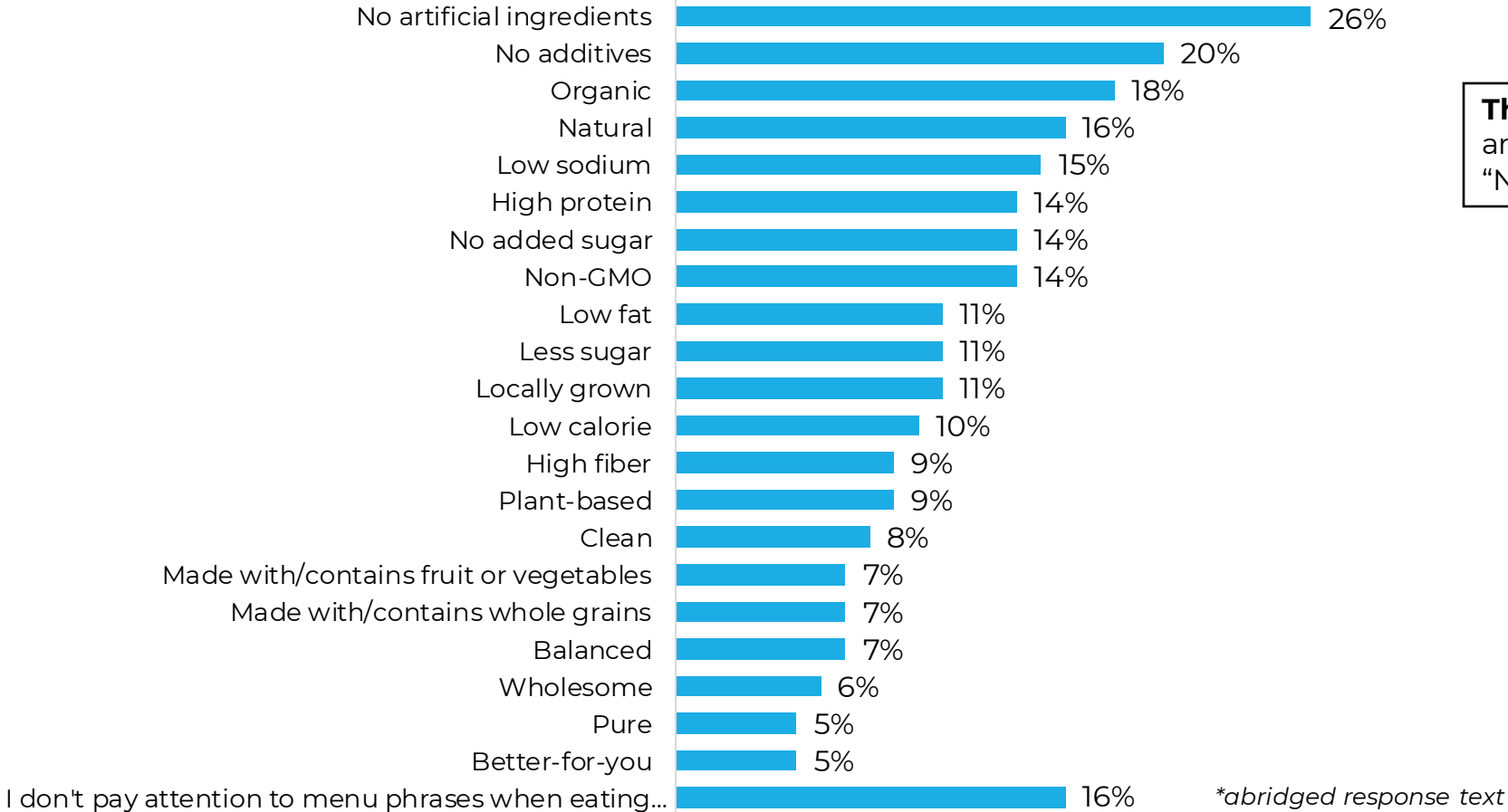
Those under age 45 are less likely to select “No artificial ingredients.”

Q13. Imagine you are in the supermarket looking at food packages. Select which phrases you would use to help determine if a food is healthy. Select top 3.

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

When dining out, consumers use similar label indicators as when at a supermarket to determine if a food is healthy

With one distinction: twice as many do not pay attention to claims or labels



Those under age 45 are less likely to select "No artificial ingredients."

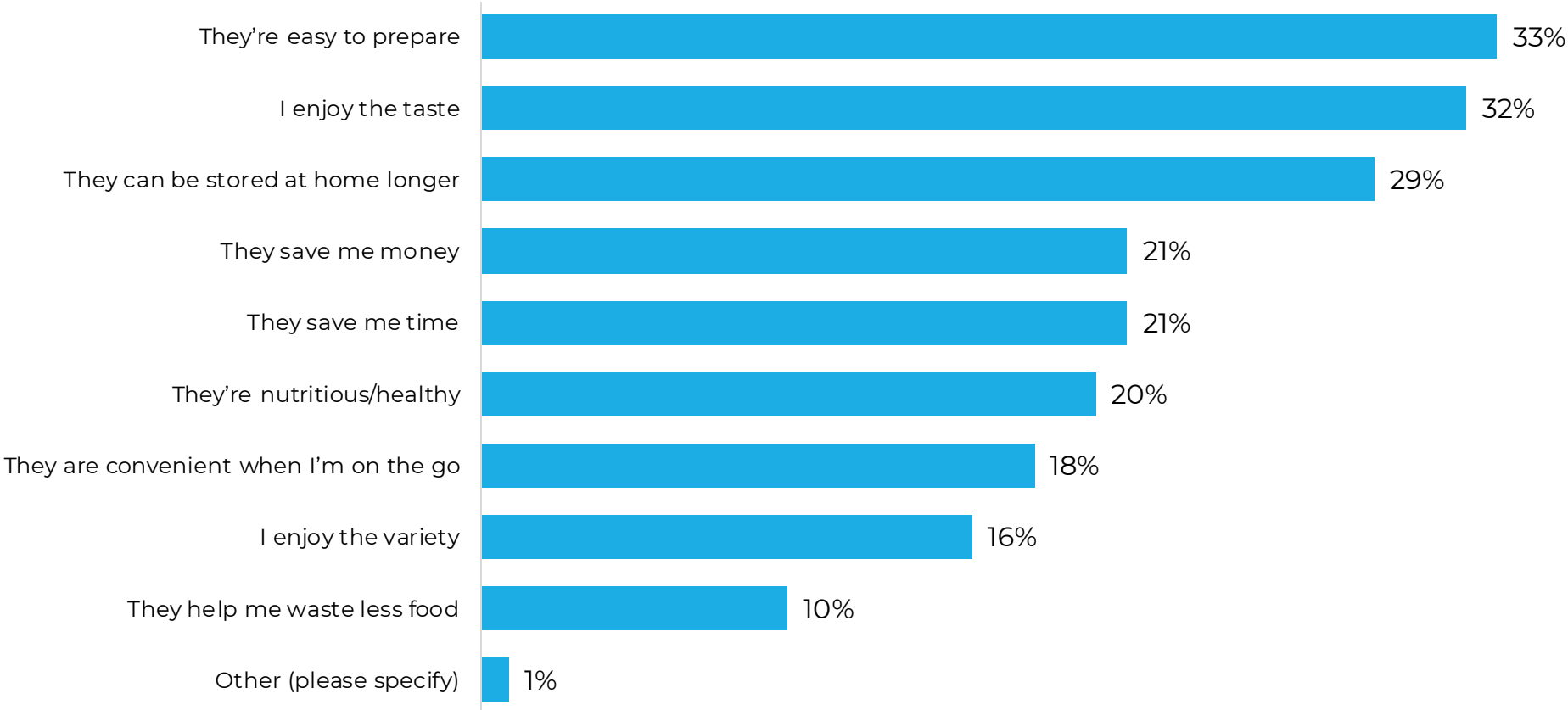
**abridged response text*

Q14. Imagine you are at a restaurant/café looking at the menu. Select which phrases you would use to help determine if a food is healthy. Select top 3.

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods

Easy to prepare, taste, and longer shelf-life are top reasons for eating packaged foods

1 in 5 say they eat packaged foods because they are nutritious/healthy



Q15. Think about the types of packaged foods (e.g., canned black beans, frozen fruit, crackers, etc.) you have on hand at the place where you live. Why do you tend to eat these types of foods? Select top 2.

Source: 2024 IFIC Consumer Research: Public Perceptions of Processed Foods



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