

food **Insight**

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IFIC FOUNDATION

*Current Topics in
Food Safety and Nutrition*

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Are You Listening?

What Consumers Tell Us About Dietary Recommendations

For almost 30 years, Americans have been hearing about the dangers of fat in their diets. Research has established that too much dietary fat may be linked to risk of diseases such as heart disease, some cancers and obesity.

For health professionals and educators, this is old news. And most consumers realize that a diet high in fat may not be as healthy as a diet lower in fat. So, why aren't Americans making the switch to lower fat diets? Is it because they don't care? Or, are they getting the wrong messages?

What Does the Research Say?

Actually, consumer research studies indicate that most people DO care about nutrition and health but are having trouble translating interest into behavior change.

According to the Food Marketing Institute's (FMI) 1999 *Trends* study, nearly 7 out of 10 consumers say their diets need some improvement. While they know their diets should be better, dietary intake data suggest they are making some, but not great, strides in improving their diets.

There is a dichotomy between what they know they should do and what they are actually doing. Part of this "nutritional schizophrenia" may, in part, be because people feel they've heard so much confusing

and conflicting information. It may also be that they perceive the barriers to achieving "nutritional utopia" are too great for them to overcome.

What Do Consumers Say?

To better understand consumers' feelings about nutrition and to explore the dietary messages that have led to their particular feelings, in the fall of 1998, the International Food Information Council (IFIC) conducted focus groups of female consumers (primary nutrition gatekeepers who make most of the food choices and purchases for the family). This research comprised the first part of a multi-phase plan to develop dietary fats messages that are consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, and are meaningful and empowering to consumers.

Continued on page 4

FEAR
ANGER WORRY
ANGER GUILT
HELPLESSNESS

Myths and Facts About Food Biotechnology

Food biotechnology offers tremendous promise to the health of Americans, to feeding the world's population and to the environment. However, in recent months, this issue has been the focus of an international debate. Concerns about the safety of biotechnology have been the main focus of the argument. Many of the issues raised are based on speculation and emotion, rather than on sound science. The following seeks to shed some light and provide the science behind some of the key questions being asked about food biotechnology.

MYTH: The application of biotechnology to crops and food is very different from traditional agricultural methods.

FACT: Biotechnology is an evolution of traditional agricultural methods. In the past 10,000 years people have routinely used their knowledge of plants to improve food production. Biotechnology is simply the latest development in the evolution of agricultural methods. Farmers used to rely on plant breeding to add, or eliminate, specific genetic traits in a plant. For example, corn today looks nothing like it did one hundred years ago because of plant breeding. Although it typically took several growing seasons to produce a plant that expressed a desired trait, farmers were able to create crops that:

- were resistant to drought, insect pests and diseases;
- possessed stronger stalks and improved ability to withstand strong winds; and,
- produced higher yields.

Genetic enhancement, a key feature of modern agricultural biotechnology, is a more efficient and precise way to achieve the benefits of crop improvement. Using new technologies, scientists are now able to pinpoint the gene responsible for a particular trait, then extract, or add, that gene to a specific plant.

MYTH: Foods produced using biotechnology have not been established as safe nor are they adequately regulated.

FACT: Biotechnology is one of the most extensively researched and reviewed agricultural developments ever. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as well as individual state governments, work together to ensure that crops produced through biotechnology are safe to eat. In 1992, FDA determined that crops produced by biotechnology must meet the same rigorous standards as those created through traditional means. While there is no such thing as "zero risk" for any food, consumers can be confident that foods produced using biotechnology meet the government's stringent food safety standards. Years of research indicate the benefits of agricultural biotechnology far outweigh any risks.

Companies conduct advanced research and analyses on food developed using biotechnology. This adds an additional layer of safety. FDA recently applauded several companies for taking extra steps to protect consumers and "doing far more extensive testing than has ever been done...."

MYTH: The application of biotechnology to food only benefits food producers, not consumers.

FACT: Biotechnology benefits both producers and consumers. Products recently introduced to the market provide obvious consumer benefits such as enhancing flavor and freshness, boosting nutritional value and reducing saturated fat content. Biotechnology has additional indirect benefits for consumers including reduced use of pesticides and more sustainable tillage practices, which address costly environmental problems like water pollution. For developing countries, biotechnology can increase yields, thereby helping to address food shortages and hunger.

In time, biotechnology may produce: biodegradable packaging; alternatives to chemical pharmaceuticals; and more healthful food products (e.g. vegetables with increased quantities of antioxidants to reduce the risk of cancer; fruits as a delivery medium of vaccines for diseases that devastate Third World countries).

Research shows that U.S. consumers strongly support these products. According to a study conducted by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) in October 1999, a clear majority of U.S. consumers were likely to buy produce modified to improve taste and freshness. Seventy-seven percent were likely to buy produce modified to protect against insects. Most important, consumers are optimistic about the potential of biotechnology. Nearly two-thirds of Americans surveyed in October 1999, for a study conducted by IFIC, believe biotechnology will provide benefits to their family in the next five years.

MYTH: Without special labeling, consumers face unknown risks from food biotechnology.

FACT: The Food and Drug Administration's labeling policy for foods produced using biotechnology ensures that consumers are given important information about a change in the end product, not the process used to make the food. The FDA's guidelines were developed in the late '80s and early '90s.

The guidelines that FDA finalized in 1992 require foods grown using biotechnology, or foods containing ingredients that were derived from biotechnology, to have special labels if:

- a known food allergen has been introduced;
- the nutritional content of the food has been changed; or,
- the product's composition has been substantially changed. (There are no foods currently on the market containing allergens transferred via biotechnology.)

A study conducted by IFIC in October 1999, showed that more than two-thirds of Americans support FDA's policy.

MYTH: Crops produced using biotechnology will negatively impact the environment.

FACT: Biotechnology is a key element in sustainable agriculture that will benefit the environment. Benefits include reduced pesticide use, water and soil conservation and greater safety for workers and the ecosystem.

Many crops—including tomatoes, potatoes, corn and cotton—now have the internal ability to repel insects. Consequently, fewer applications of pesticide need to be applied to the plant. A certain type of corn used to feed hogs will reduce the phytic acid in animal waste that traditionally cause algae to grow in water supplies. Finally, the ability to obtain greater crop yield from existing land decreases the need to convert forests to farmland. All of these environmental benefits are possible because of biotechnology.

MYTH: The production of crops resistant to certain pests and weeds will lead to "Super Bugs" and/or "Super Weeds" immune to existing methods of pest and weed management.

FACT: There are no scientific studies suggesting this kind of scenario could occur as a result of crops developed through biotechnology. There are, however, many systems in place – including crop rotation, hybrid rotation and integrated pest management – as a precautionary measure to help prevent it from occurring. Insects and weeds already evolve and develop tolerance or resistance to their environment, so biotechnology can potentially better manage this evolution in resistance. The potential transfer of

traits by pollen remains the same as ever.

MYTH: Genetically modified corn kills monarch butterflies.

FACT: In May 1999, *Nature* magazine published a letter from researchers at Cornell University that reported findings suggesting further research is needed into the relationship between pollen from select strains of Bt corn and the monarch caterpillar. Since that publication, many university researchers, including others at Cornell, have stepped forward to stress that the monarch study did not represent natural conditions and that extensive environmental research has confirmed the safety of Bt corn on non-target insects, such as the ladybird beetle, honeybee and the green lacewing, in the natural environment.

Dr. John Losey, the Cornell University entomology professor who conducted the research agreed with these researchers and noted, "Our study was conducted in the laboratory and, while it raises an important issue, it would be inappropriate to draw any conclusions about the risk to monarch populations in the field based solely on these initial results."

As with any scientific issue, several studies are needed before conclusions can be made.

MYTH: Biotechnology cannot relieve world hunger.

FACT: Biotechnology can help alleviate hunger worldwide. In the next 50 years the global population is expected to double, reaching more than 8 billion people by 2050. Population growth and diet upgrading will require the food supply to increase by at least 250 percent from its current quantity. The amount of land currently committed to food production – approximately 36 percent of the earth's cumulative land mass – cannot yield the amount of food needed by this increased population. Although forests could be cleared to obtain needed acreage, a better approach is to find ways of getting greater crop yield from existing land. Biotechnology can increase the quantity of the harvest by addressing the factors that traditionally deplete crops: pests, weeds, drought and wind. Plants from biotechnology can deal

with these hardships and dramatically increase the percentage of crops that survive and are harvested each year.

MYTH: The long-term effects of foods developed using biotechnology are unknown.

FACT: From years of research, we know that the benefits of food biotechnology are tremendous, with no additional risk. The scientific consensus is that the risks associated with food biotechnology products are fundamentally the same as for other foods. Current science shows that foods made from biotechnology are safe to consume, and safe for the environment. For this reason, FDA, USDA, EPA and a host of other regulatory agencies have determined that these products are safe to introduce into the food supply. While there is no such thing as "zero risk" for any food, consumers can be confident that foods produced using biotechnology meet the government's most stringent food safety standards. The future is never guaranteed, but years of research and the absence of harmful evidence indicates the benefits of agricultural biotechnology far outweigh any risks.

When asked about the "hysteria" surrounding the application of biotechnology to food in Europe, Dr. James Watson, the scientist who discovered the structure of DNA, likened the resistance to the initial ban placed on medical biotechnology. If that ban had continued, "it would have stopped us from understanding cancer and a whole host of things," he noted. "To argue that you don't know what is going to occur is true about everything in life. People wouldn't get married, have children, do anything...."

For a more complete version of this article, access our website <http://ificinfo.health.org>

In focus groups, when asked the degree of comfort they had with their diets, not one of the women reported being 100 percent comfortable. In fact, the vast majority expressed considerable discomfort about what they eat. **Guilt, worry, helplessness, anger** and **fear** were the primary emotions expressed about their diets.

*"I feel like a bad mom.
I know that my kids should
have better things to eat."*

Guilt about eating habits results from feeling they are not doing what is expected of them, or what is right. Their guilt was focused on particular foods such as rich desserts and snack foods. However, guilt is pushed aside with the crush of other obligations and other aspects of their lives that are greater priority. Overall, their guilt seems strong enough to produce powerful discomfort, but not strong enough to produce permanent behavior change.

Worry and **fear** emerge from thinking about the effect of not eating a "healthy" diet. This was especially true of women who know or live with persons with diet-related illnesses such as diabetes or colon cancer.

*"I worry about 10 or 15
years from now. There's
cancer in my family. You try
to balance out meals, but
you do worry about it."*

Feelings of **helplessness** seem to take two forms—the first, being out of control and the second, being overwhelmed by information. Feeling out of control often stems from personal experiences around food, such as binges or intense cravings leading the women to eat in excess. In an era of 24 hour news programs and instantaneous information on the Internet where nutrition messages are constantly barraging consumers, information overload often leaves them feeling helpless and unable to make "the right" food choices.

A different form of helplessness results from the volume of negative nutrition information, leading consumers to believe there is no realistic chance of eating a healthful diet. This frustrated many women so much that they may soon stop listening to nutrition information.

*"I just feel like—forget it.
I don't have time to worry
about all this stuff—
and I tune it out."*

The perceived inconsistencies and fluctuations in nutrition recommendations that they read, see and hear in the media evoked a fair amount of **anger** in some of the participants.

*"[When researchers
contradict each other,]
I feel anger, not knowing if I
have to be the researcher
myself to know for sure."*

motivated
RELIEF
Empowered
ENJOYMENT

Fear, although mentioned less often, was a disturbing source of discomfort about diet. Much of the fear comes from projecting what they eat today to some future serious disease such as cancer or heart disease.

"I'm scared of fat now. We're constantly bombarded with how bad it is for us."

Dietary Fat: Nutrition Slander?

Dietary fat is, by far, consumers' number one concern about diet. The FMI *Trends* survey shows that half of consumers cite "fat" as their chief concern, with cholesterol a distant second at 18 percent. In focus groups, women said they'd heard the message "cut down on fat" and have some knowledge about the relationship between fat and heart disease.

Using the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* message on dietary fats, "Choose a diet low in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol," participants were asked how the message made them feel and what "action" was suggested. The majority of women interpreted the guideline to mean that they should reduce their fat intake as much as possible. One participant illustrated her interpretation of the low fat message with the phrase, "no fat, no taste, no enjoyment."

When the message was slightly changed to "Choose a diet moderate in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol," the reactions to the message were consistent – most felt it implied common sense and responsible choices. Two very strong distinctions emerged between the "low fat" and "moderate fat" message – motivation and control. The adjective "moderate" would be more likely to motivate them towards achieving a healthful diet and the verb "moderate" is something that they have the power (control) to do.

For most, the difference between the "low fat" message and the "moderate fat" message was that they expressed they could actually achieve a diet moderate in

MESSAGE	REALLY MEANS...
<i>Choose a diet LOW in fat...</i>	<p>"Don't eat fat."</p> <p>"No more gravy, ice cream."</p> <p>"No more donuts."</p>
<i>Choose a diet MODERATE in fat...</i>	<p>"It goes back to common sense."</p> <p>"Moderate allows you to say, 'Yeah, I can handle that.' As opposed to low fat, which is almost no fat."</p>

fat. In addition, several believed "moderate" is more motivating than "low."

It is clear that current nutrition guidance has left consumers with negative feelings about food and their diets. We also know that this message hasn't caused them to dramatically change their behaviors. So how do we talk to consumers in a way that is meaningful?

Ideal Message about Dietary Fat, According to Female Consumers

- "Maybe a message saying, if you eat your five servings of fruit and vegetables a day, the result will be a diet moderate in fat."
- "Tell them they don't have to limit what they eat. Tell them that it's okay to eat that hot fudge sundae once in a while — that it's not that hard to do."
- "Women need positive, encouraging words, instead of just 'don't'."

From IFIC's research, it is clear that messages should-

- Address sources of discomfort about eating habits
- Empower consumers to make changes
- Set a positive goal that consumers perceive as "doable"

New Nutrition Conversation with Consumers

With the approaching new millennium, it is time to begin a "new nutrition conversation with consumers." To affect behavior change, messages about food and nutrition should be positive and should speak to consumers in ways they understand, believe and that will motivate them to change. Bringing consumers into the message development process can help ensure resulting messages inspire trust and action.

NewsBites

PROJECT SPARK

A new study published in the *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* in June 1999, shows that active children may be better learners. Researchers for the Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids (SPARK) program, a health-related physical education program for elementary schools, wanted to determine the impact of the health-related SPARK program on children's academic achievement.

The study was conducted in seven elementary schools in San Diego County. The effect of the two-year health-related school physical education program on standardized academic achievement scores was assessed in 759 children in 4th and 5th grade. Schools were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: SPARK taught by physical education specialists; SPARK taught by trained classroom teachers; and the control group of students who continued their usual physical education program.

The students took a standardized test before and after participating in the SPARK program. Results of the study show that on three comparisons, students in the SPARK classes scored better on standardized tests than the control students. Students who were taught by a trained classroom teacher were the most likely to have improved test scores. This study shows that health-related physical education may have favorable effects on students' academic achievement.

NUTRITION & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: 2 SIDES OF THE SAME HEALTHY COIN

The important relationship between physical activity and a healthful lifestyle has been emphasized recently by health professionals, and strongly supported by documents such as the *Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health*. As such, it is more important than ever that physical activity and nutrition professionals work together to help consumers realize the potential benefits of these healthful practices.

As a first step in achieving this goal, in 1997 the International Food Information Council, the American College of Sports Medicine and The American Dietetic Association formed a partnership to assess the attitudes, activities, and information sources and needs of nutrition and physical activity professionals responsible for communicating the important balance between good nutrition and physical activity to achieve effective weight management and an overall healthful lifestyle.

The resulting Gallup survey of 623 fitness and nutrition professionals is summarized in the article, "For a healthful lifestyle: Promoting cooperation among nutrition professionals and physical activity professionals," published in the August 1999 issue of the *Journal of The American Dietetic Association (JADA)*.

The findings show the importance of communication between dietitians and physical activity professionals and the value of increased use and sharing of existing resource materials of both disciplines to further mutual goals.

For a copy of the *JADA* article, write or e-mail IFIC at <http://ificinfo.health.org>.



NEW BROCHURE FOR TEENS A WINNER

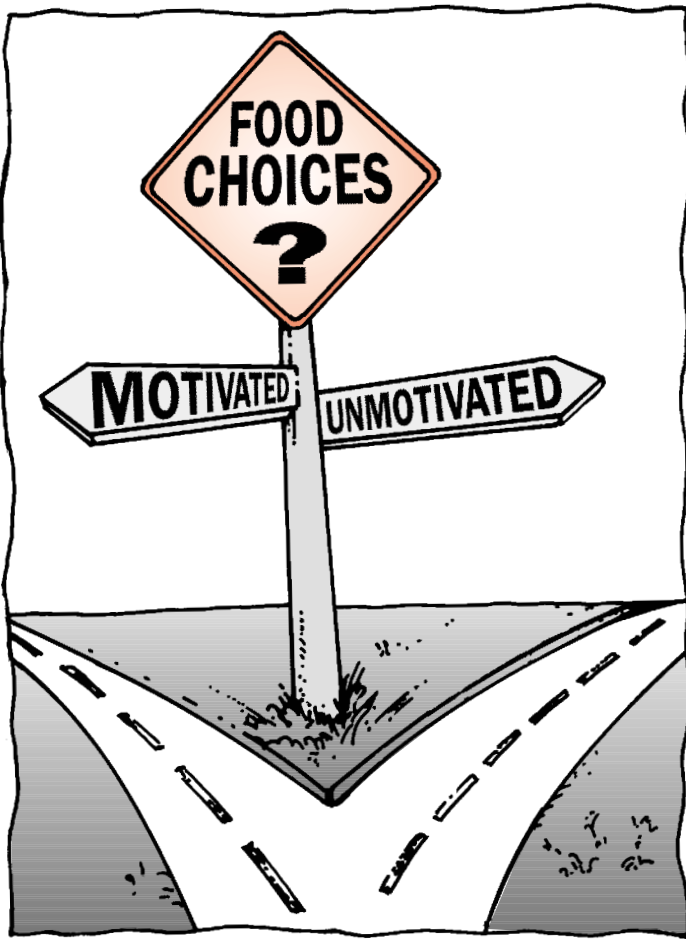
A new brochure, *Take Charge of Your Health!: A Teenager's Guide to Better Health*, is now available from the Weight Control Information Network (WIN) of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health. The brochure, cosponsored by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation, empowers teens to make decisions that will help improve their health. Teens learn about important choices, such as good eating and physical activity habits that can affect their overall health and their performance in day-to-day activities, such as schoolwork and sports. Tips for healthful snacking and increasing physical activity are included as well as a guide to help teens recognize what counts as a serving size.

For a free copy of this brochure, send a self-addressed, stamped legal-sized envelope to:

Take Charge of Your Health, PO Box 65708, Washington, DC 20035.

WHAT'S NEW at ? [HTTP://IFICINFO.HEALTH.ORG](http://ificinfo.health.org) ?

A recent *Food Insight* story, "The Mouse that Roared: Health Scares on the Internet," discussed the credibility of health information on the Internet. The issue is being evaluated by other organizations as well. To review the results of a study conducted by the University of Michigan on Internet health information, go to <http://www.umich.edu/~newsinfo/Releases/1999/Jul99/r072699a.html>



Functional Foods Attitudinal Research

The International Food Information Council (IFIC) has been directing a four-year research effort on “functional foods” (foods that may provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition) to find out how consumers obtain, process and use information to make decisions about their diet. Specifically, IFIC research explores consumer attitudes toward the concept of functional foods using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The most recent focus groups, conducted in Spring of 1999, compared how two different consumer segments responded to the same information on functional foods. The two segments included *unmotivated* consumers, those who were aware of the connection between diet and health but had not made significant changes to their diet. The second segment consisted of *motivated* consumers who were aware of the diet and health connection and had changed their diet based on such information.

Interestingly, the unmotivated consumers expressed a high degree of skepticism about news media and other sources of information on diet and health. They cited numerous excuses for not changing their diets: they “don’t have the time to prepare the right foods”; they “don’t like the taste of many foods thought to be

Continued next page

New IFIC Foundation Publications

Below are the newest releases from the IFIC Foundation. Single copies of most publications are available free-of-charge. For a comprehensive listing of publications or for bulk prices, please request the IFIC Foundation Publications List below.

- Publications List (MI-4010)** A complete list of publications and *Food Insight* reprints available from the IFIC Foundation.
- Improving Public Understanding: Guidelines for Communicating Emerging Science on Nutrition, Food Safety, and Health (MI-4175)** Based on an advisory group convened by the Harvard School of Public Health and the International Food Information Council Foundation, this publication provides “guiding principles” for general communicators as well as specific guidelines for scientists, journal editors, journalists and interest groups.
- Fat Replacers Tool Kit (MI-4205)** A tool kit designed to help nutrition educators communicate with both health professionals and consumers about fat replacers. Kit includes slide masters, scripts, references and a glossary of ingredients and a collection of third-party organizations’ resource information. Please send ___ copies at \$5.00 and \$1.50 shipping and handling.
- Food Biotechnology Resource Kit (MI-4080)** This updated and redesigned kit is a compilation of back-grounders on food biotechnology topics, including product benefits, consumer attitudes, federal safeguards and labeling, and the environment. The most recent data on consumer attitudes and government regulatory issues are included. The kit also includes positions of other leading health professional organizations, along with an extensive resource list. Please send ___ copies at \$10.00 each. Enclosed is a check for \$___.

- Understanding Food Allergy (EB-2035)** A patient education brochure that provides general consumers, patients and parents with the basics of food allergy, food intolerance and food idiosyncrasy. Endorsed by the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology and The Food Allergy Network.
- Benefits of Balance: Managing Fat in Your Diet (EB-2080)** A new consumer brochure details how lower-fat foods and foods with fat replacers can be included in the overall diet to balance food choices. It was developed in partnership with the Food and Drug Administration.
- Caffeine and Health: Clarifying the Controversies (IR-3020)** This updated IFIC Review highlights new research, provides background information on caffeine and seeks to dispel misconceptions that exist about the ingredient.
- Children’s Nutrition and Physical Activity Teaching Set (MI-4200)** A teaching set designed to help kids ages 9-15 understand the importance of combining nutrition and physical activity. The set features a 22”x34” two-sided color poster highlighting the Physical Activity Pyramid alongside the Food Guide Pyramid. Set includes the Ten Tips to Healthy Eating and Physical Activity for You brochure, reproducible slick and poster. Please send ___ copies at \$3.50 and \$1.50 shipping and handling.

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beneficial; and “there’s no convincing evidence that diet makes a difference.” Even those consumers who cited having close relatives become victims of heart disease or cancer would not sacrifice taste or convenience to improve their diet. The good news is that many did allow that they might be open to consuming a beneficial component that had been added to a food they already liked. Calcium fortified orange juice was a popular example.

Motivated consumers, on the other hand, regularly absorb and believe in a tremendous amount of information on diet and health. These consumers, empowered by knowledge from multiple, credible sources, really believe they have control over their own health. Unlike the unmotivated, these consumers want to avoid repeating the experience of a close relative who contracted disease. Some were also influenced to make changes by a warning from a physician about their own state of health. Others could cite a positive personal experience or had always been conditioned to recognize the positive impact of food on health.

Learning more about consumer motivators for choosing functional foods is increasingly important. This year has been a real crossroads in terms of realizing their promise. Foods and dietary supplements containing soy protein or plant sterols to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease will continue to be at the center of attention. Uncertainties about regulatory

Responsibly communicating the benefits of functional foods may be the key to advising consumers about this new and exciting opportunity to optimize diet and health.

boundaries will provide challenges. Responsibly communicating the benefits of functional foods may be the key to advising consumers about this new and exciting opportunity to optimize diet and health.

New from the IFIC Foundation:

Background on Functional Foods: This backgrounder, favorably reviewed by the University of Illinois Functional Foods for Health Program, provides everything from a definition of functional foods, to an explanation of the driving forces fueling U.S. interest in functional foods, and the need for scientific criteria. In addition, a list of functional components, their sources and potential benefits are included.

Functional Foods Attitudinal Research: This fact sheet summarizes IFIC’s qualitative and quantitative research over the past 4 years.

Current Topics in Food Safety and Nutrition



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