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INTERNATIONAL FOOD INFORMATION COUNCIL FOUNDATION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 16, 2018

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One-Third of Americans Are Dieting, Including One in 10 Who Fast … While Consumers Also Hunger for Organic, "Natural" and Sustainable

More than one in three U.S. consumers are following a specific diet or eating pattern, and they are increasingly averse to carbohydrates and sugar, according to the 13th Annual Food and Health Survey, released today by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation.

Given a list of diets to choose from, or the option to write in a response, **36 percent** of Americans reported following a specific eating pattern or diet within the past year, about two-and-a-half times the number (**14 percent**) from 2017 when it was an open-ended question.

The top eating pattern cited was intermittent fasting (**10 percent**). Diets considered at least somewhat restrictive of carbohydrates were well-represented, including Paleo (**7 percent**), low-carb (**5 percent**), Whole30 (**5 percent**), high-protein (**4 percent**), and ketogenic/high-fat (**3 percent**). Younger consumers (age 18 to 34) were more likely to follow a specific eating pattern or diet than those 35 and above.

More Americans than in previous years blame carbs, and specifically sugars, for weight gain. While sugars continue to be the most cited cause of weight gain (**33 percent**), carbohydrates ranked second at **25 percent**, up from 20 percent in 2017. Both of those numbers are the highest since 2011. Fats (**16 percent**), protein (**3 percent**) and "all sources" (**17 percent**) lagged behind when placing blame.

Cardiovascular Health Is Top Desired Benefit, But Consumers Don't Know How To Achieve It

Almost all consumers are interested in getting specific health benefits from food or nutrients. However, the top two desired health benefits in 2018 changed places from 2017: This year, **20 percent** ranked cardiovascular health as their top desired benefit, followed by weight loss or weight management at **18 percent** and energy at **13 percent**. In 2017, those numbers were **16 percent, 32 percent** and **14 percent** respectively.

But consumers don't know, and remain confused, about how to achieve these desired outcomes; only **38 percent** are able to name a food they would seek out to help with their top health concern. Protein was most frequently identified (**10 percent**), followed by vegetables (**7 percent**), vitamins and minerals (**5 percent**) and fruits (**4 percent**).

"This dietary disconnect — the inability to connect specific foods and nutrients to desired health outcomes — illustrates the need for stronger, clearer, nutrition education based on the best available evidence," said Joseph Clayton, CEO of the IFIC Foundation.

Eight in 10 (**80 percent**) consumers said there is a lot of conflicting information about what foods to eat or avoid, a number similar to 2017. Of those people, **59 percent** say that conflicting information makes them doubt their food choices—but the data show a troubling disparity among ethnicities, with those who doubt their choices as a result of conflicting information rising to **78 percent** of Hispanic consumers.

Organics, "Natural" and Sustainability Grow As Priorities

"Food values" continue their growth as a factor in consumers' decision-making, with organics increasingly popular in purchasing choices. When shopping for foods and beverages, **29 percent** buy those labeled "organic," up from **25 percent** in 2017. The increase is even more significant when people eat out: **20 percent** said they eat at restaurants with foods and beverages advertised as organic compared to **14 percent** last year.

Similarly, **37 percent** of shoppers bought foods and beverages billed as "natural," up from **31 percent** in 2017, and **26 percent** of consumers ate at restaurants with "natural" food and beverage options compared to **23 percent** in 2017.

The importance of sustainability in food production also loomed larger in 2018, with **59 percent** of consumers saying it's important that the foods they purchase and consume be produced in a sustainable way, jumping up from **50 percent** in 2017.

Out of those 59 percent who believe sustainability is important, their top two most important individual factors of sustainability increased significantly over 2017: **33 percent** in 2018 said reducing pesticides was their top priority, up from **27 percent** in 2017, while ensuring an affordable food supply increased to **16 percent** in 2018 from **10 percent** last year.

Consumers Favorable to the Familiar, Averse to the "Artificial"

The key drivers behind consumers' food and beverage purchases are largely unchanged in 2018. "Taste" still reigns supreme (as it has every year the Food and Health Survey has been conducted), with **81 percent** saying it has at least some impact in their buying decisions, followed by familiarity (a new addition in this year's survey, at **65 percent**), price (**64 percent**), healthfulness (**61 percent**), convenience (**54 percent**) and sustainability (**39 percent**).

Perhaps unsurprisingly in the current communications environment, consumers are averse to artificial ingredients, at least compared to the alternatives. When asked to choose between two versions of the same product — an older one that includes artificial ingredients and a newer version that does not —

seven in 10 (**69 percent**) chose the product with no artificial ingredients, while one-third (**32 percent**) chose the one containing artificial ingredients.

We also asked those who preferred a product with *no* artificial ingredients how much they would be willing to pay versus a similar product *with* artificial ingredients that cost $1.00: **62 percent** would pay up to 10 percent more ($1.10) for the product without artificial ingredients; **42 percent** would pay up to 50 percent more ($1.50); and **22 percent** would pay double the price ($2).

Context is also key in how consumers perceive the healthfulness of two products with otherwise identical nutritional content. When asked to identify the healthier of two products with the same Nutrition Facts Panel, **40 percent** perceived one labeled "non-GMO" as healthier vs. **15 percent** for one with genetically engineered ingredients, and **33 percent** believed a product with a shorter ingredient list was healthier than one with more ingredients (**15 percent**).

But a little of the luster is off the "fresh food" halo from last year, at least compared to frozen foods. A significant change from 2017 was that **41 percent** in 2018 perceived a fresh product to be healthier than a frozen one, which dropped from **47 percent** last year, while **10 percent** (in both 2017 and 2018) believed frozen products were healthier.

Trust in Government Agencies Grows, Reliance on Multitude of Sources for Nutrition Information

This year and last year, we asked consumers to rate the sources where they often get information about what to eat or avoid, as well as how much they trust those sources.

Among 14 sources listed, government agencies recorded the biggest increases, far and away, in both measures. In 2018, **19 percent** of consumers said they often get such information from a government agency, nearly double the **11 percent** in 2017, and **38 percent** said they trust government agencies as an information source, up from **25 percent** in 2017. (One caveat: This year's question gave specific examples of agencies — USDA, EPA, FDA and CDC — whereas last year's only mentioned government agencies in general.)

Friends/family members and personal healthcare professionals tied at **30 percent** as the most relied-upon sources of information; however, healthcare professionals are far more trusted (**66 percent**) than friends and family (**26 percent**).

"Consumers continue to rely heavily on nutrition information sources they admit they don't trust," said Alexandra Lewin-Zwerdling, Vice President for Research and Partnerships at the IFIC Foundation. "This may speak to the public confusion we have consistently found on topics of nutrition and food safety."

In a couple of examples of a generational information gap, Americans age 65 and older were more likely (**76 percent**) to trust a registered dietitian compared to adults age 35 and younger (**65 percent**). In addition, when asked which source of information most influenced their opinion on food safety issues, **44 percent** of those age 65 and older cited news articles or headlines, while only **16 percent** of those age 18 to 34 agreed.

Our Dinner Plates Don't Match "MyPlate"

What Americans believe the experts recommend about which foods should fill an adult's dinner plate isn't too far off from the actual guidance from USDA's MyPlate. But when it comes to what we *actually* eat … well, that's a different story.

USDA's "MyPlate" recommends that our plates are about half fruits and vegetables, with the rest of the plate divided up by grains (half of which should be whole grains) and protein, with dairy represented by a separate circle next to the plate. When consumers were asked which foods they believe experts recommend should fill our plates, they were on the mark with vegetables (**30 percent**) and fruits (**21 percent**), while protein (**29 percent**) and grains (**20 percent**) made up the balance.

What we *really* eat diverges from the recommendations, with protein leading the way at **38 percent**, followed by vegetables (**29 percent**), grains (**21 percent**) and fruits (**12 percent**). About half (**48 percent**) said they include dairy often or always; only **2 percent** said they never include dairy products.

Methodology

The results are derived from an online survey of 1,009 Americans ages 18 – 80, conducted March 12 to March 26, 2018. Results were weighted to ensure that they are reflective of the American population, as seen in the 2017 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 Foundation is supported primarily by the broad-based food, beverage and agricultural industries. Visit http://www.foodinsight.org.