

2012 Executive Summary



INTERNATIONAL
FOOD INFORMATION
COUNCIL FOUNDATION

The International Food Information Council Foundation's 2012 Food & Health Survey takes an extensive look at what Americans are doing regarding their eating and health habits and food safety practices.

Americans Find Doing Their Own Taxes Simpler than Improving Diet and Health

But, they recognize room for improvement and want to do better.

The 2012 *Food & Health Survey: Consumer Attitudes toward Food Safety, Nutrition & Health*, commissioned by the International Food Information Council Foundation, is the seventh annual national quantitative study designed to gain insights from Americans on important food safety, nutrition, and health-related topics. The research provides the opportunity to gain insight on how Americans view their own diets, their efforts to improve them, how they balance diet and exercise, and their beliefs and behaviors when it comes to food safety.

Americans are interested in food and health related issues, with nearly all saying that they have given at least a little thought to the healthfulness of their diet, physical activity, and the safety of their food. In an environment where media reports are constantly highlighting concern over the “obesity epidemic” and seemingly contradictory news stories tout and condemn various nutrients, many consumers acknowledge that it can be hard to know what to believe. This could explain why over half of Americans believe it is easier to figure out their income taxes than to figure out what they should and shouldn't eat to be healthier.

While Americans find it difficult to know what to believe about ever-changing nutrition information, nearly all are trying to improve at least one of their eating habits. They are considering calories and various dietary components (such as whole grains, fiber, sugars, salt and fat) when making food purchasing decisions, and many cite weight management and other health factors as the reason why they consider these components. It's important to note, however, that taste continues to be the most important factor when it comes to purchasing decisions, with price coming in second and healthfulness as the third most important factor when making food purchasing decisions.

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The International Food Information Council Foundation 2012 *Food & Health Survey* was conducted by Mathew Greenwald & Associates of Washington, D.C. This 25 minute, web-based survey was fielded in early April 2012. The survey respondents were reflective of the demographics of the U.S. population, and while the sample was very close to the target demographics, the data was weighted so it matched the demographics of the sample matched U.S. population targets exactly. This year, the weighting adjustments were very minor.

This *Survey* offers the important voice and insights of the consumer for health professionals, government officials, educators, and other interested individuals who seek to improve the lives of Americans.

The following are key findings from the 2012 *Survey*.

Overall Health Status:

Nine out of ten Americans describe their health as good or better, a significant increase from previous years. The majority (60%) report that their health is either excellent or very good, and only nine percent report that they are in fair or poor health. Despite their belief that they are in good health, many Americans recognize there is room to improve their diet, with only about a quarter reporting that their diet is either extremely or very healthful and about 21 percent reporting their diet is not at all or not too healthful. Nearly all Americans report that they are trying to improve at least one aspect of their eating habits, and nearly nine in ten (87%) have tried to eat more fruits and vegetables.

Weight Management:

More than half of Americans (55%) report that they are trying to lose weight, which is a significant increase from 2011 (43%); however, the number does seem to return to historical norms (54% in 2010, 53% in 2009, 57% in 2008 and 56% in 2007). While 22 percent indicate they are trying to maintain their weight, only 20 percent report that they are not doing anything regarding their weight. These numbers have remained fairly consistent for the past few years of the *Survey*.

Calories and Energy Balance:

While the majority of Americans (71%) estimated their daily calorie needs, 64 percent of them estimated incorrectly with nearly half (49%) under estimating. Only about one in seven Americans (15%) accurately estimates the number of calories they need to maintain their weight. More than half of Americans are unable to provide an estimate of how many calories they burn in a day (52%) or offer inaccurate estimates (19% say 1000 calories or less).

When it comes to calories, only three in ten Americans (30%) correctly believe that all sources of calories play an equal role in weight gain. Twenty percent believe calories from sugars are most likely to cause weight gain, a significant increase from 2011 (11%). Nineteen percent believe that calories from carbohydrates are most likely to cause weight gain, and 18 percent believe it is calories from fats.

Physical Activity:

Although Americans are evenly split on what is harder to do well between consistently eating a healthful diet (52%) and consistently being physically active for at least 30 minutes a day for five days per week (48%), we do see that the majority report being at least moderately active. Interestingly, men are more likely than women to report finding it easier to be consistently physically active than to consistently eat a healthful diet.

The vast majority of Americans (94%) have given at least a little thought to the amount of physical activity they get, with sixty-one percent reporting that they have given a lot of thought to the issue. Two out of

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three Americans consider themselves active, though only a few (11%) consider themselves to be vigorously active. While Americans' physical activity levels have remained relatively steady; fewer Americans (34%) consider themselves to be sedentary.

Among those who are active, half report that they include strength training in their physical activity regimens. Similar to last year, a large majority of Americans (77 percent) are not meeting the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *Physical Activity Guidelines*.

Sustainability:

Two-thirds of Americans report that they have given some thought to whether foods and beverages they purchase or consume are produced in a sustainable way. When asked what actions they purposely take on a regular basis, about four in ten (41%) say they purchase foods and beverages that are advertised as "local." A slightly smaller percentage report buying "foods and beverages at farmers markets" (39%) and purchasing "foods and beverages in recycled and/or recyclable packaging" (38%).

Dietary Fats:

Many Americans still look to avoid dietary fat. Two out of three Americans (67%) say they try to eat as little fat as possible, even though a large majority understands that different fats can have different impacts on health. Only about 1 in 5 (22%) believe all fats have the same impact on health, yet many are limiting or avoiding several types of fats. While 49 percent say they are trying to avoid *trans* fat, 32 percent also say they are trying to limit the more healthful mono- and poly-unsaturated fats.

Lowering fat intake is compelling to Americans. Three out of four (75%) say they choose products that are lower in total fat at least *sometimes*. Weight and health considerations, specifically reducing the risk of heart disease, are the main reasons for monitoring fat content in food and beverage products.

Sodium:

Six out of ten Americans consider the sodium content of packaged foods—almost always due to a desire to limit or avoid it entirely. Most Americans say they are doing something regarding sodium intake. Eight out of ten Americans (78%) have taken at least one of six specified actions to limit their sodium consumption, with "limiting the amount of salt I add to my food" being the most cited action.

The large majority of Americans (81%) say they have normal blood pressure although; although, nearly one in four (23%) indicate this is achieved with the help of medication. As one would expect, the share that use medication to maintain a normal blood pressure rises with age. For the 33 percent of Americans who say they have high blood pressure or normal blood pressure with medication, the top control strategies are medication (79%), attempts to lose weight (68%), and reduction of sodium or salt intake (65%). For the 63 percent of Americans whose blood pressure is in the normal or low range without the use of medication, almost half (48%) have taken actions to keep it so, such as reducing sodium or salt intake (29%), attempts to lose weight (27%), and increasing the type or level of physical activity. Of those Americans who are making an effort to manage their blood pressure, regardless of their blood pressure status, the majority report they are doing so in an effort to take more responsibility for their health. One in four (26%) say they are making efforts to manage blood pressure because they have read or heard that they should. Fifty-seven percent of those who have high blood pressure or normal blood pressure with the help of medication report they are making an effort to manage their blood pressure due to a doctor's directive.

Carbohydrates & Sugars:

When making packaged food or beverage decisions over the past twelve months, many Americans (51%) say they are trying to limit or avoid sugars. While more than 4 in 10 (44%) indicate they are trying to limit

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or avoid high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), a similar number (45%) say they don't pay attention to HFCS. The majority of Americans also say they don't pay attention to complex (60%) or refined (62%) carbohydrates when making packaged food or beverage decisions. Weight management (62%) and preventing a future health condition (54%) are the most common reasons Americans are considering sugars or carbohydrates when making food purchasing decisions. Additionally, among those who pay attention to carbohydrates and sugars content, almost half (47%) choose products based on the type of sweetener.

Most Americans believe that sugars can be included in a healthful diet. A little more than six in ten Americans agree that moderate amounts of sugar can be part of an overall healthful diet (62%) and that it is not necessary to completely eliminate sugar from your diet in order to lose weight (61%). Additionally, more than 4 in 10 (43%) agreed that people with diabetes can include some foods with sugar as part of their total diet. All three responses were significantly higher than in 2011.

Low-Calorie Sweeteners:

Almost half (46%) of consumers are considering whether or not the packaged foods or beverages they purchase contain low-calorie sweeteners. Of those who report that they are consuming low-calorie sweeteners (30%), either actively or passively, the majority of respondents (73%) say the reason they do so is for calorie control. An increasing percentage of Americans (41%) agree this year that low-calorie sweeteners can reduce the calorie content of foods and are an option for people with diabetes. In addition, four in ten Americans acknowledge the role low-calorie sweeteners can play in weight management, and one-third agree that they can be part of an overall healthful diet, both significant increases from 2011, but similar to levels seen in earlier surveys.

Protein:

Nearly six out of ten Americans consider protein when making a decision about buying packaged food or beverages, and the majority report that they are trying to consume more. Americans understand the varied benefits of protein, with 88 percent recognizing that it helps build muscle, 80 percent believe that it is part of a balanced diet, 60 percent agreeing that it helps people feel full, and 60 percent indicating that a high protein diet can help with weight loss. While 84 percent of Americans believe that it is easy to incorporate protein into their diet, a quarter of Americans also believe that these foods are too expensive to consume as much as they would like.

More consumers (47%) try to eat protein during an evening meal than during other meals or snacks; however, more than half (52%) of Americans simply try to get enough protein over the course of the day or week rather than focus on specific meal times.

Americans believe that higher amounts of protein are especially beneficial for athletes (80%) and teens (66%) than children under 12 (51%) and people aged 55 or older (46%).

Food Additives and Colors:

When it comes to functions food additives and colors serve in foods, most Americans (68%) agree that food additives extend the freshness of certain foods. Four in ten also understand that food colors contribute to the appeal of food, a significant increase from 2011 (29%). More than half of Americans (56%) understand that both natural and artificial food colors must be labeled on food packages. In terms of the regulation of food additives and colors, the majority of Americans (60%) recognize that the FDA regulates the use of food additives. In addition, almost half of consumers agree that food colors must be reviewed and approved by the U.S. government before being added to foods (46%), which has remained constant since 2010. However, only about one-third realize that the FDA sets allowable daily intakes for food

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additives and that non-government scientists and experts are involved in the review process of food additives before they are approved by the FDA.

Food Safety:

More than eight out of ten Americans (85%) admit to giving some thought to the safety of their foods and beverages over the past year, and 78 percent are very or somewhat confident in the safety of the U.S. food supply. Nearly six out of ten Americans (57%) agree that the chances they will actually get foodborne illness or food poisoning (like Salmonella or E.coli) from something they eat or drink are extremely low. Only one in six (17%) report that they have stopped buying a specific brand or type of food due to concerns about its safety; however, concerns about bacteria (51%), “chemicals” in food (51%), imported food (49%), pesticides (47%), animal antibiotics (30%) and undeclared allergens (25%) do have an impact on what foods or brands of food Americans purchase.

Americans perceive the person who prepares most of the food in their home do the best job of ensuring the safety of their food (94% report that the individual does at least a good job; 44% report the individual does an excellent job). Eighty-two percent of Americans view farmers/producers as doing a good job or better and 73 percent for retailers. While food manufacturers, food service establishments and the government rank lower (65%, 64% and 56% respectively), all entities charged with ensuring the safety of the U.S. food supply are viewed as doing at least a good job.

About half of Americans (48%) feel that imported foods are less safe than foods produced in the United States. Most of those who feel that imported foods are less safe than domestically-produced foods (77%) attribute that to a lack of regulation. Sixty-one percent believe that imported foods are produced in less sanitary conditions, and sixty percent believe they could become contaminated or spoiled during travel to get to the U.S.

Information Sources and Influences:

Three out of four consumers (76%) feel that changes in nutritional guidance make it hard to know what to believe. When asked how they determine whether to believe new information about food and health, Americans indicate they will follow up and do their own research before they believe it (26%), will judge information based on the source and if it is from an organization they trust (24%), and will simply use their own judgment and will not believe it if it seems too good to be true (14%). Nearly six in ten Americans (57%) believe that online and mobile tools can help them live healthier lifestyles.



Americans find the *MyPlate* graphic to be effective in conveying the desired messages of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans:

- People should eat a variety of food groups for a balanced diet—95%
- People should eat a healthful diet—91%

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- Healthful foods are found in each of the five food groups—82%
- People should have dairy with their meals—78%
- People should make half their meals fruits and vegetables—75%
- For more information, people can visit ChooseMyPlate.gov—74%

Food Labeling:

Packaging information most commonly used by American consumers includes the expiration date (76%) and the Nutrition Facts panel (66%). These two pieces of information have consistently been at the top of the information consumers seek from the food package; however, the expiration date jumped significantly from 2011 (63%) to overtake the Nutrition Facts panel. Half of consumers report that they look at the ingredients list, the serving size and amount per container, and calorie or nutrition information icons displayed on the front of the package.

When making decisions about buying packaged food or beverages, at least six in ten Americans report considering calories (71%), whole grains (67%), fiber (62%), sugars in general (60%), sodium/salt (60%), and/or fats/oils (60%).

While Americans acknowledge room to improve and report they are trying to improve the healthfulness of their diet, over half (54%) report that they would rather just enjoy their food than worry too much about what's in it.

Purchasing Influences:

Similar to past years, taste and price continue to drive food and beverage choices (87% and 73% respectively) more than healthfulness (61%), convenience (53%) or sustainability (35%). While there was a significant decrease in the number of Americans who reported that price, taste and sustainability had an impact on their purchasing decisions from 2011 (79%, 66%, and 58% respectively), the numbers appear to have returned to historical norms (except sustainability, which was new in 2011 and for which the norm will become clearer in future surveys). Older Americans are more likely than those who are younger to report that healthfulness, taste and sustainability impact their food selection, while price is more important for consumers younger than 50 years of age.

Family Health:

Nearly nine in ten parents believe that it is good for their health to sit down and eat meals with their family, with fifty-seven percent strongly agreeing to that point. Two-thirds of parents worry more about the healthfulness of their children's diets than their own.

The full *Survey* findings and additional information are available on the International Food Information Council Foundation's website: www.foodinsight.org.

About the International Food Information Council Foundation

Our Mission

The International Food Information Council Foundation is dedicated to the mission of effectively communicating science-based information on health, food safety and nutrition for the public good.

Additional information on the Foundation is available on the "About" section of our Web site: www.foodinsight.org.

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