CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS ABOUT HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD

Improving the way Americans eat depends in large part on the choices they make for themselves and their families. Not all changes in food consumption require explicit decisions about health and nutrition, but depend instead on subtle contextual factors that can “nudge” people into making wiser choices. Examples include the order in which food is presented in cafeterias, the sizes of plates, social norms, and more. Yet the explicit decisions people make about what to eat, or whether and how to improve their diets, are key to progress.

At least three U.S. agencies are charged with helping to define what is “healthy.” The Institute of Medicine sets guidelines for nutrients, which include protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) translates those recommendations into food groups and foods. The third agency is the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). It approves specific health claims (such as, “1.5 ounces per day of most nuts, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease”) and defines the criteria for label claims (for instance, how low in fat a product must be to indicate it is “low-fat” or “reduced fat”).

Other groups that provide nutritional health recommendations include professional associations such as the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society. The food industry, particularly the developers and providers of packaged and processed foods, adds another level of complexity with claims such as “natural,” “zero net carbs,” or “rich in antioxidants.”

All in all, there is a lot of information. The good news is that in 2014 the FDA introduced a revamped version of the standard Nutrition Facts label, which replaces out-of-date serving sizes and aligns them with how much people really eat, as well as a design that downplays the importance of total fat and highlights key parts of the label such as calories. But on the whole, consumer confusion has continued to mount. Many consumers rely on mass media sources for information and probably receive more little than more headlines or soundbite versions of research claims about health and nutrition. New claims—about recommended sodium intake, saturated fat and heart disease risk, the effects of a low glycemic diet, and on protective effects of being overweight—have been rendered into headlines throughout the popular press, sometimes based on flawed research and sometimes misrepresenting the findings of sound research. Together, many of these headlines—that low salt is risky and higher salt protective; that saturated fat is just as healthy as unsaturated fat; that avoiding sugar and starches is not beneficial; and that overweight people live longer—sound like permission to eat fast food with impunity.

New findings about consumer attitudes present a mixed picture. An online survey of mothers conducted soon after the release of USDA’s MyPlate found those most likely to have adopted MyPlate were mothers who already had been using MyPyramid. This means that MyPlate had not yet reached much beyond people already motivated to seek out nutritional guidance. A study of low-income urban schools before and after the adoption of healthier school meal standards found that the amount of food children threw away remained high but did not get worse, and that fruit and vegetable consumption increased. But not all studies report such positive results.

Over the past year, consumers were also confronted with a range of continuing debates: calories in/ calories out versus good calories/bad calories; breakfast is/ is not the most important meal of the day; GMO foods are perfectly safe/hazardous to health and the environment; organic foods do/don’t provide health benefits; and the aforementioned debates about sodium, saturated fat, and refined sugars.

How can consumers navigate the morass of continually shifting recommendations? One of the main problems is that the information most available to consumers tends to be “expert” advice in the form of dictates, without providing a compelling rationale. Moreover, experts can disagree, in part because flawed research can be hyped by the media and in part because, like all sciences, knowledge of nutrition is continually being refined and expanded. But it can be hard not to become skeptical when experts disagree, the advice is contradictory, and there is little other basis on which to make a decision.

It is easy, then, to dismiss expert advice and just eat what you want.

To equip consumers with effective decision-making strategies, we should turn to evidence-based studies of how people reason about nutrition and what governs their decision-making when faced with such inconsistencies. Research in psychology has documented that people, even young children, often try to make sense of complicated domains in terms of explanatory principles and causal mechanisms. For example, a 2013 study published in the journal Psychological Science was designed to carefully calibrate materials for teaching young children about nutrition, in particular about the need for eating a variety of healthy foods. The investigators first documented what children already believed, then designed age-appropriate materials to enable them to better understand nutrition. Greatly surpassing their peers, preschool and early elementary school children exposed to these materials showed a deep understanding of key nutrition concepts: different foods have different nutritional profiles; diverse biological functions require different nutrients; digestion releases nutrients from foods; and blood carries the nutrients throughout all parts of the body. And in two studies, children who had been provided with this explanation for the need to eat a variety of healthy foods selected more vegetables during their snack time. By cutting through the confusing, ever-changing advice about eating, this evidence-based approach could be extended to adult consumers to provide them with a coherent framework to reason about healthy food choices.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
By continuing to make healthy foods tempting, delicious, readily available, and affordable, chefs and foodservice professionals can encourage healthier food choices using scientifically validated recommendations, such as those provided by the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. On the other hand, because consumers are bombarded by a continual flow of contradictory information about what is healthy, but no coherent conceptual structure in which to reason about health and nutrition, the time is right to develop a coherent, evidence-based educational framework about nutrition that would foster effective decision-making.

SCORE: 2
Even consumers motivated to make healthier food choices can’t help but be confused given the steady barrage of inconsistent advice, including efforts to create confusion around the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee’s report.

IN SUMMARY:
- A variety of U.S. agencies are responsible for offering nutrition advice and determining what foods are considered “healthy.” Confusion about what to eat is only heightened by contradictory messages or oversimplified news headlines.
- New and existing research from the field of psychology offers evidence-based studies that can be adapted into effective decision-making strategies for consumers.
- Chefs and foodservice leaders can help minimize confusion by making healthy food craveable, available, and affordable.