



Beliefs and Attitudes of Americans Toward Their Diet

INSIGHT 19

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The American diet needs improvement—so indicates the USDA’s Healthy Eating Index (HEI), which reported an average score of 63.6 of a possible 100 for the 1994-96 period. But are Americans interested in improving their diet? And how is that interest related to their dietary status? This *Nutrition Insight* examines the beliefs and attitudes of Americans toward their diet.

Data from a 1991-94 survey conducted by Market Research Corporation of America (MRCA) were used. Nationally representative, the survey consists of information on people’s food and beverage consumption over 14 days and their opinions and attitudes about general interests, health, diet, food preparation, shopping, and media usage. The sample consisted of 1,851 adults (18 years old and over). The results were weighted to represent the population of interest.

A Modified Healthy Eating Index Used to Measure Diet Quality

A modified version of the HEI was used to assess the overall quality of the American diet. This modified version uses 9 of the original 10 components. Components 1-5 measure the degree to which a person’s diet conforms to serving recommendations of the Food Guide Pyramid food groups: Grains (bread, cereal, rice, and pasta), vegetables, fruit, milk products (milk, yogurt, and cheese), and meat and meat alternates (meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts). As a percentage of total intake of food energy, component 6 measures consumption of total fat; component 7, saturated fat. Component 8 measures total cholesterol intake; component 9, sodium intake. The score for each component ranges from zero to 10. Intermediate scores are computed proportionately. The MRCA data set does not provide enough information to calculate variety of a person’s diet on any given day (component 10 of the original HEI), so variety is not reported. All HEI scores on the modified version were adjusted to a 100-point scale. Thus the total maximum score was 100. Scores greater than 80 imply a good diet; between 80 and 51, a diet that needs improvement; and less than 51, a poor diet. Higher component scores indicate intakes that are closer to recommendations.

About 2 of 10 People Want to Improve Their Diet

Twenty-three percent of the people surveyed were interested in improving their diet, compared with 37 percent who were not

Table 1. Americans’ interest in improving their diet, by selected characteristics and nutrition-related beliefs, 1991-94

	Interest in improving the diet		
	Yes	No ¹	Needs no improvement
Sample	409	590	852
Percent	23	37	40
	<i>Percent</i>		
Race			
White	80	93	92
Non-white	20	7	8
Gender			
Male	37	62	53
Female	63	38	47
Percent of Poverty			
130 and under	36	24	22
131 and over	64	76	78
Beliefs			
Diet is unhealthful.	58	32	5
Too much emphasis is placed on nutrition.	37	69	48
Eating healthfully is too complicated.	70	69	40
Most snacks consumed are unhealthful.	77	68	49

¹Not interested in improving the diet or believes changing the diet will do no good.

interested and 40 percent who believed their diet needed no improvement (table 1). Whereas 20 percent of those who were interested in improving their diet were non-White, 7 percent of those not interested and 8 percent of those who said their diet did not need improvement were non-White. Sixty-three percent of those interested in improving their diet were female. Thirty-eight and 47 percent, respectively, of the others who were either not interested or who believed their diet did not need improvement

Table 2. Americans' interest in improving their diet, by scores on the modified Healthy Eating Index, 1991-94

	Interest in improving the diet		
	Yes	No ¹	Needs no improvement
Total HEI Score	54.4 ^a	54.2 ^a	59.2 ^b
Grains	5.21 ^a	5.25 ^a	5.84 ^b
Fruit	2.62 ^a	2.26 ^a	3.82 ^b
Dairy	4.59 ^a	5.24 ^b	5.38 ^c
Meat	7.58 ^a	7.56 ^a	7.54 ^a
Vegetable	5.16 ^a	5.00 ^a	5.84 ^b
Total fat	4.77 ^a	5.05 ^a	5.91 ^b
Saturated fat	3.55 ^a	3.43 ^a	4.39 ^b
Cholesterol	8.11 ^a	8.28 ^a	7.93 ^a
Sodium	7.38 ^a	6.72 ^b	6.65 ^{c,b}

¹Not interested in improving the diet or believes changing the diet will do no good.

Note: Groups in the same row with different superscripts have significantly different mean scores on the modified version of the HEI, at $p \leq .0125$.

were female. Over one-third (36 percent) of those interested in improving their diet had a household income at or below 130 percent of the poverty threshold. Less than one-fourth, each, of the others had an income within this range: 22 percent (no need to improve) and 24 percent (not interested).

Eating Healthfully—Many Believe—Is Too Complicated

People interested in improving their diet were more likely than others to believe their diet was unhealthful: 58 versus 32 percent (not interested) and 5 percent (no need to improve). About 7 of 10 Americans not interested in improving their diet believed that too much emphasis was placed on nutrition, compared with 37 percent of those interested in improving their diet and 48 percent of those who said their diet needed no improvement. Seven of 10 Americans interested in improving their diet, as well as 7 of 10 not interested in improving their diet, believed eating healthfully was too complicated. Only 4 of 10 who said their diet needed no improvement believed eating healthfully was too complicated.

Snacks were perceived as unhealthful by a majority of people. Over three-fourths of those interested in improving their diet and over three-fifths of those not interested in doing so thought their snacks were unhealthful. Also half (49 percent) of those who believed there was no need to improve their diet also believed they consumed unhealthful snacks.

Americans Need to Improve Their Diet

Regardless of the desire to improve their diet, people need to eat healthfully to prevent the occurrence of chronic, nutrition-related diseases: In 4 of the 10 leading causes of death for this country, poor diet and lack of physical activities are significant contributing factors. For the Americans studied, mean scores on the modified HEI indicated the diet needed improvement (table 2). Scores ranged from 54.2 to 59.2. Those interested in improving their diet had about the same score (54.4) as those not interested in improving their diet (54.2).

Among the components related to the Pyramid food groups, Americans' scores were lowest for fruits. Among the moderation components, the scores for cholesterol were best. Over a 14-day period, Americans interested in improving their diet, compared with those who believed their diet needed no improvement, had lower daily mean scores for grains (5.21 vs. 5.84), fruits (2.62 vs. 3.82), and vegetables (5.16 vs. 5.84). A similar pattern existed for total fat and saturated fat. Dairy and sodium scores differed among all groups, with those who wanted to improve their diet having the lowest dairy score (4.59) and the highest sodium score (7.38). Meat scores were similar for all groups.

Conclusion

Results show that people know their diet is poor. Some believe their diet needs no improvement; and yes, their diet is better than that of their counterparts. However, although people's attitude about improving their diet differed, they have one thing in common—their diet needs improvement. Helping Americans improve their diet will mean targeting their interest to do so and addressing some of their other diet-related beliefs, attitudes, and practices (e.g., belief that eating healthfully is too complicated and the practice of eating what many believe are unhealthful snacks). When nutrition-related beliefs and practices lead to healthful dietary practices, the likelihood of reducing the incidence of chronic, nutrition-related disease becomes more promising, and all Americans benefit.

Note: For more details on the Healthy Eating Index and how it is computed, the reader is referred to Bowman, S.A., Lino, M., Gerrior, S.A. and Basiotis, P.P. 1998. *The Healthy Eating Index: 1994-96*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. CNPP-5. Available at <http://www.usda.gov/cnpp>.

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