

# Top 10 Nutrition Trends for 2015

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## 1) The definition of healthy eating is broadening beyond nutrition.

A healthy diet used to mean one that provided all the nutrients and food groups in the correct amounts. Now it encompasses many other factors such as environmental and agricultural considerations. As a result, consumers have an increasing array of choices at the supermarket. Should they choose organic vegetables and milk? Should GMO-produced foods be avoided? What about hormones, antibiotics and water usage?

As the definition of healthy eating expands to include environmental issues, health professionals can play a big role in this movement. Those who work with the food industry can encourage open communication with consumers about where and how food is produced. Staying abreast of technological advances such as biotechnology in food production will enable them to alleviate fears and explain benefits to consumers. Recent advances, for example, have allowed for reduced pesticide use, minimized water use, greater production on less land and improved nutrition. *Health professionals can empower consumers to make educated decisions about the food they purchase and consume, remembering that nutrition should remain a driving factor.*

## 2) Public health recommendations focus on dietary patterns.

With the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans to be released later this year, considerable discussion has centered on healthy dietary patterns, with 3 distinct patterns identified in the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) discussions—the Healthy US-style Pattern, the Healthy Mediterranean-style Pattern and the Healthy Vegetarian Pattern. The committee emphasizes that it is not necessary or advisable to eliminate food groups or conform to a single dietary pattern; rather, the goal is to combine foods in a variety of flexible ways to achieve healthy dietary patterns.

The DGAC draft recommendations for a healthy diet include low-fat or fat-free dairy, vegetables, fruits, whole grains, seafood, legumes and nuts. Reduced consumption of processed meat, sugar-sweetened food and beverages and refined grains is also recommended.

The focus on dietary patterns rather than on specific nutrients is positive as it gives consumers a feasible way to achieve a healthy diet. Each of the food groups provides a unique set of nutrients. For example, the Milk + Milk Products group provide 3 of the 4 “nutrients of public health concern,” which include vitamin D, calcium, potassium and fiber—and whose under-consumption has been linked to adverse health conditions. The Vegetables group provides fiber, vitamins A and C and other essential nutrients. *Health professionals can encourage consumption of healthy dietary patterns that include all 5 food groups to help consumers reach their recommended intakes, and to make tallying of individual nutrients or calories unnecessary.*

## 3) Sugar continues to be demonized as the culprit in many diseases.

Sugar continues to be implicated in many ailments from obesity to diabetes. As a result, various strategies seek to lower the sugar content of foods, educate consumers and discourage consumption of products high in added sugar. One example is taxing sweetened foods and beverages. The 2015 Dietary Guidelines may follow the World Health Organization’s recommendation that “free sugar” (which includes added sugar, honey, syrup, fruit juice and fruit juice concentrate) compose less than 10 percent of calorie intake.



The US Food and Drug Administration is proposing changes to Nutrition Facts labels to include a separate line for added sugar, making it easier for consumers to distinguish between naturally occurring and added sugar. Some foods, like fruit and milk, contain natural sugar in the form of fructose and lactose; however, increased attention on sugar could demonize both natural and added sugar. A potential unintended consequence is that consumers may avoid these healthy foods that provide essential nutrients in the diet.

In addition, some foods like flavored yogurt contain added sugar but also provide significant levels of nutrients. Many experts agree that nutrient density is a better measure of a product's overall nutritional contributions, and targeting specific detrimental components can backfire. All foods consumed in moderation, and consistent with individual calorie needs, can be part of a healthy, balanced diet. *Health professionals can help educate about nutrient density and highlight the differences between natural and added sugar.*

#### 4) Controversy around sodium recommendations escalates.

The current sodium recommendations—1500 to 2300 mg/day—are being upheld by the American Heart Association, American College of Cardiology, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health organizations. The basis for this is that too much salt can raise blood pressure, putting individuals at greater risk for heart disease and stroke. The Institute of Medicine 2013 Report, however, states that there is insufficient evidence to support this recommendation. New research is showing a J-shaped curve between sodium intake and mortality, indicating that low levels as well as very high levels can be harmful to health.

Some experts estimate that only about one-third of the population may benefit from sodium reduction strategies. In particular, the research in children is weak, yet standards are being imposed on them that, some believe, may cause harm.

Current intakes of sodium in the United States are about twice the recommendations, with much of the sodium coming from processed foods. Simply advocating for a diet with more healthful, less processed foods will help reduce sodium consumption and improve overall nutrition. *Health professionals can stay abreast of this dialogue, helping their clients achieve appropriate levels of sodium intake that are tailored to their specific needs, goals and lifestyles. The DASH Diet, high in low-fat dairy, vegetables, fruits and whole grains, is a dietary pattern proven to reduce blood pressure and is a good alternative to strict sodium limitations or even to medications for some people.*

#### 5) Public policy advocates for plant-based diets due to sustainability concerns.

As sustainability becomes a key aspect of food production practices, public policy is on the verge of incorporating environmental measures into dietary recommendations. As an example, the 2015 DGAC included sustainability in its meeting discussions for the first time.

Many health agencies are advising plant-based diets not only for health reasons but also out of concern for the environment, citing research that greenhouse gas emissions are higher for animal-based versus plant-based foods. Many organizations also advocate for locally produced, natural and unprocessed foods to reduce environmental footprint.

Food choices, however, still need to be based on health and nutritional attributes to avoid unintended consequences such as nutrient deficiencies and chronic disease. In advising their clients, health professionals are in a unique position to balance sustainability concerns with health and nutrition goals. *Health professionals can also stay educated as to current agricultural practices that have successfully reduced environmental impact while increasing production ... critical in meeting the projected population growth to 9.5 billion people by 2050.*



## 6) Protein continues to carry a health halo.

Protein-containing products are riding the wave of popularity, driven by research showing that protein is beneficial for many areas beyond muscle building, including weight management, blood sugar control, bone health and sarcopenia prevention. Consumers are seeking high-protein foods, and in turn, manufacturers are adding protein to earn product labels stating “good source of protein” and “excellent source of protein.”

Animal protein from meat and dairy foods is considered the highest quality protein. However, there is lack of understanding around protein quality, and many marketers lump plant sources together with animal sources in order to tout the protein content of their products. Also of note, protein consumption that is evenly distributed throughout the day is thought to provide the most benefit, which means that for many Americans, more protein is needed at breakfast and lunch to even out the daily distribution. *Health professionals can inform clients about the expanded health benefits of protein, direct them toward high-quality protein sources and help plan diets with evenly distributed protein content.*

## 7) Probiotics and the gut microbiome gain steam in the health arena.

Probiotics, known for their benefits to intestinal health and the immune system, are now being investigated for their preventative effects against chronic diseases such as cancer, high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes. Recent studies have even made a connection between probiotics and mental health—an area of interest given our aging population.

The microbiome—the collection of trillions of microbes living in the gut—is recognized as playing a role in many basic life processes, greatly impacting health and disease. Scientists believe that the microbiome may be responsible for a broad range of metabolic and developmental processes from food digestion to vitamin synthesis to brain function.

However, probiotics and the microbiome are not yet top-of-mind for most consumers. While there was some mention of the topic in recent DGAC discussions, the 2015 dietary recommendations are not expected to address probiotics. Consumers will likely drive the market based on word of mouth, the media and product manufacturers. *Health professionals will need to stay abreast of current research on the health benefits of probiotics and stay aware of products in the marketplace to better advise clients.*

## 8) Snacking becomes more prevalent among all demographic groups.

Trends show that snacking now provides about one-quarter of calories and a substantial proportion of daily fat, sugar and salt intake. Snacks can be an opportunity to fill nutrient gaps from meals that may be lacking in food groups or nutrients. For example, on average, 25 percent of calcium and 14 percent of protein are consumed through snacks. However, consumers often indulge rather than consider nutrition when snacking. The message that snacks can taste good and be nutritious is important.

Consumers benefit from learning to plan healthy, appealing, convenient snacks throughout the day. There are many snack-friendly products in the marketplace that make this feasible. *Health professionals can educate parents and children on how to plan and prepare healthy snacks, with a focus on nutrient-dense, convenient and tasty options.*



## 9) Efforts to improve health through community venues are instrumental to disease prevention.

Significant changes are affecting the structure, staffing and availability of health care, which includes nutrition education. Community-based health clinics are now housed in a wide variety of settings, including churches; schools; and drug, warehouse and grocery stores. Paraprofessional staff provide services for everything from prescription refills to flu shots. Peer health workers conduct in-home consultations that assess both consumer health and living situations such as community, family, socioeconomic status and other factors that impact health and disease risk.

With the increase in incidence of obesity and related diseases like diabetes and heart disease, health care gatekeepers are focusing on disease prevention and self-management in addition to wellness. Client groups that are often remiss in preventative health, like low-income groups and specific ethnic groups such as Hispanics, may particularly benefit from greater access to health care with a focus on disease prevention.

Schools are another venue for health care delivery, with school-based nutrition education and health centers on the rise. It is well-accepted that disease prevention starts in early childhood with healthy diet and lifestyle habits. Children can benefit from nutrition and health messages, and families are reached through take-home materials. *Health professionals can increase their impact by exploring partnerships with community health centers, schools and other venues.*

## 10) The face of nutrition education is changing.

Factors such as technological advances and changing consumer eating patterns are impacting how nutrition education is being delivered. Technology plays a significant role in health and nutrition as consumers become more adept at accessing personalized information from websites and mobile applications. At the same time, the 24/7 availability of snacks and convenience foods is changing the way consumers eat. When they do eat at home, they often “assemble” meals rather than cook from scratch.

All of this means that nutrition messages need to be more creative, reaching consumers where they are—whether at the workplace, at school, at the store or elsewhere—with mobile device applications, videos, websites and social media. Successful messages need to be tailored to individuals and be motivational and feasible. *Health professionals can better reach today’s consumers by utilizing these new venues and strategies that promote positive behavior changes that consumers can adopt.*

The Dairy Council of California has a Nutrition Trends Task Force which includes 12 staff members, eight of whom are registered dietitians. The Task Force meets three times per year to review the trends in nutrition research, policy and communications. Staff is responsible for tracking a wide variety of publications, both scholarly journals and news media that report on nutrition issues. This summary outlines the top nutrition trends identified and discussed at the winter 2015 meeting.

