

Trends and Changes in Consumer Attitudes About Nutrition and Food Shopping

by Michele M. Tuttle, MPH, RD, Director, Consumer Affairs, Food Marketing Institute

In 1994, the average supermarket contained approximately 30,000 items from which consumers could make selections. With so many choices to make, consumers can easily feel overwhelmed and confused, especially when it comes to making decisions about eating healthfully.

Each year, the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) conducts two consumer survey studies to assess what shoppers want from their supermarkets. The survey data include information on store attributes as well as attitudes about nutrition. The information presented today highlight results from *Trends in the United States: Consumer Attitudes and the Supermarket, 1995* (published annually by FMI since 1973) and *Shopping For Health, 1995: New Food Labels, Same Eating Habits?* (published jointly by FMI and Prevention Magazine since 1992). Both studies are conducted via telephone interviews with approximately 1,000 participants. Participants were contacted via random digit dialing and represent a nationwide sample of supermarket shoppers.

Trends in the United States, 1995

Store Attributes

Many factors influence where a consumer decides to shop. The five most important factors are having quality produce (99%), a clean and neat store (99%), good variety (98%), low prices (97%), and courteous employees (96%). In addition, 84% of shoppers report that having nutrition information available to them in the supermarket is very or somewhat important.

Factors in Food Selection

For many years now, a vast majority of consumers (90%) have reported that taste is their primary concern when selecting foods, followed by nutrition (74%), price (69%) and product safety (69%). Of these factors, the importance of price and product safety have fluctuated over time, while the other factors have remained relatively stable for the past 10 years.

Attitudes About Nutrition

While a majority of consumers report that nutrition is important to them when they select foods, 57% report that they are "very concerned" about the nutritional content of what they eat. The number of very concerned shoppers has fluctuated between 55 and 64% over the past 7 years, with no clear trend in either direction.

Consumers are currently most concerned about the amount of fat in their diets. This year, nearly 65% of shoppers reported fat as their main concern, an eight-fold increase since 1984. Only cholesterol has ever approached this level of concern when in 1990, 44% of shoppers ranked this as their main concern. In 1995, only 18% of shoppers felt that cholesterol in food was their primary concern.

Most consumers (70%) feel that their diets could be somewhat or a lot healthier. Only 20% feel their diets are healthy enough, while 10% feel that their diets are as healthy as possible. Most respondents (92%) report that they had made dietary changes for a more healthful diet. The most frequently reported dietary change was increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables (63%), followed by eating fewer fats and oils (34%), and eating less meat (34%).

When asked who has primary responsibility for ensuring that the food products they buy from the supermarket are nutritious, many shoppers (45%) feel that they themselves are responsible. An additional 23% report that manufacturers are responsible, while 13% feel that government agencies should be responsible.

Shopping for Health, 1995

Since 1992, the *Shopping for Health* study has surveyed shoppers on a variety of topics related to attitudes about health and eating. Each year, the study focuses on certain core areas and then also examines a specific area related to nutrition. This year's study focused on the Nutrition Facts label and its impact on shoppers.

Attitudes About Nutrition

Most shoppers are interested in nutrition when grocery shopping but confusion exists about how to make healthful selections. When shoppers were asked to respond to the statement, "There is so much conflicting information, I am not sure what to eat anymore," 44% mostly or strongly agreed. This number has risen somewhat since 1992 when 41% agreed that there was too much conflicting information.

Shoppers are also increasingly in agreement with the statement, "I am tired of experts telling me which foods are good for me." In 1994, 47% reported that they either mostly or strongly agreed with this statement, while this year, 55% agreed.

Although shoppers may be tired of experts, over 40% agree that they are concerned about fat but are unsure how to reduce their intake. However, this proportion of shoppers has declined from last year when nearly 50% agreed that they were unsure about how to reduce their dietary fat. The introduction of the new food label may be helping consumers gain confidence in their ability to make lower fat choices.

A greater number of consumers now believe that eating healthfully is more expensive. Fifty-one percent of consumers mostly or strongly agreed with this statement, which is a significant increase from 1992 when only 43% agreed.

Dietary Change

Although people feel there is a lot of conflicting information and that eating healthfully is more expensive, 53% reported that they had made major dietary changes for health reasons. This number has declined since 1992 when 58% reported making changes. Most people make changes for weight control and to achieve a healthier lifestyle. The most frequently mentioned change was dietary fat reduction (70%), which has steadily grown since 1992. In addition, 24% of shoppers report increasing their consumption of fruits and vegetables, while 15% report reducing dietary cholesterol.

Nutrition Labeling

Many shoppers report that they read the nutrition labels on food packages when purchasing a food item for the first time. More than 60% of consumers said that they almost always read the nutrition label, while an additional 19% report that they sometimes do. Despite this high number of label readers, only 43% report that they are aware of the new Nutrition Facts label, which began appearing on packages in late 1993 and 1994. This represents a slight increase since 1994 when 38% reported awareness of the new label.

The new label is having an impact on food purchasing behavior. Of those consumers who were aware of the new label, 22% report that they have started buying a product based on the labeling information. Approximately one-third (34%) of consumers reports that the label caused them to stop buying a product they had been regularly purchasing. When shoppers were asked what information had prompted their change in purchasing behavior, fat was mentioned most frequently. Sodium, cholesterol and calories were also factors that made people change their minds about buying products.

The results of this year's *Trends* and *Shopping for Health* studies clearly indicate the public's need for clear, consistent messages on healthful eating. There are also indications that people are beginning to understand ways of reducing dietary fat but they may be paying less attention to other nutrients. Unfortunately, there is also a trend to believe that healthful eating costs more. Although a majority of consumers are still unaware of the new label, a significant number of those who are aware are changing their purchasing decisions based on labeling information.