

Americans show paradoxical behavior when it comes to their diets, study reveals

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While more Americans report following plant-rich diets, they also are consuming more meat, Virginia Tech researchers found in a study of 10 years of national survey responses collected by the International Food Information Council. Photo by Darren Van Dyke for Virginia Tech. Credit: Darren Van Dyke for Virginia Tech.

While a majority of Americans acknowledge the health and environmental benefits of eating more plant-rich diets, only about a quarter are willing to adopt them.

That's just one of the key findings of a recent study by researchers in the Department of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise at Virginia Tech's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. The results, [published](#) in the journal *Nutrients*, revealed that Americans' beliefs about the value of eating more plants for health and environmental reasons are often at odds with their dietary choices.

"U.S. consumers have favorable perceptions of foods and beverages that support human and environmental health, but that's not translating into what they're purchasing and consuming," said the study's lead researcher, Katherine Consavage Stanley, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise.

The researchers pored over a decade of national survey responses, gathered from 2012-22 by the International Food Information Council, to examine Americans' dietary patterns and practices. They statistically analyzed more than 1,000 respondents' perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors regarding plant-rich dietary practices for each year of the study and how they related to human health, environmental, social, and [economic impacts](#).

Plant-rich diets can range from vegan and vegetarian, which avoid meat consumption, to flexitarian and Mediterranean diets, which can include small amounts of meat and fish along with plant-based foods. These types of diets are encouraged by the World Health Organization and the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization as eating patterns that promote human health, have low climate impact, and are affordable for feeding a growing world population.

The study's findings included the following:

Plants are widely perceived as healthier, but Americans love their meat

- Across all years surveyed, 73% of Americans said plant proteins were healthy; 39% said animal proteins were healthy.
- An average of 4.6% of consumers said they followed vegetarian or vegan diets.
- The percentage of Americans that reported following a plant-rich dietary pattern more than doubled across the years surveyed, from 12.1% to 25.8% by 2019-22.
- Younger consumers—Generation Z, born 1997-2012, and millennials, born 1981-96—were more likely to follow a plant-rich pattern than older consumers—Generation X, born 1965-80, baby boomers, born 1946-64, and the silent generation, born 1928-45—in all years surveyed.
- From 2020-22, the percentage of respondents who reported eating more red meat increased from 13% to 19%.
- About one-quarter of Generation Z and millennials also reported increased red [meat consumption](#) in the past year, compared to 10% of older adults.

Over a 10-year period, a declining percentage of Americans identified "healthfulness" as important in their food purchasing choices.

Eating foods identified as "sustainable" is important—but not enough to pay for it

- In 2016, 75% of respondents said it was "somewhat or very important" to purchase and consume "sustainably produced products," but this decreased to about half of respondents

- identifying this as important in future years surveyed.
- On average, 32% of consumers said "[environmental sustainability](#)" was a substantive factor in their purchase decisions.
 - Sustainability was consistently ranked as the least important factor in Americans' food and beverage [purchase decisions](#), following convenience, price, healthfulness, and taste.
 - Less than one-quarter of respondents indicated that they purposefully purchased foods labeled as organic (27%), locally sourced (26%), environmentally-friendly (21%), or plant-based (16%).

More information is needed

- Nearly two-thirds of respondents felt it was challenging for consumers to know what impact their food and beverage choices might have on the environment.
- Similarly, most respondents said that if it was easier to access information about the environmental impact of foods and beverages, it would have a greater influence on their choices.

Stanley said the findings reveal a need for government leaders, health and nutrition professionals, and the food and beverage industry itself to provide more information on the sustainability of food products.

"We can't expect consumers to make sustainable choices if they don't know the impacts of their purchases," she said. "We need to be doing more collectively to educate Americans on the benefits of plant-rich dietary patterns and to provide an environment where making healthy and sustainable purchases is the default choice."

In a follow-up study, Stanley is examining the landscape of U.S. media campaigns that encourage or discourage plant-rich dietary patterns and

practices.

"Too often corporations will place the responsibility on individuals, but Americans need a supportive food and beverage environment to make changes," she said.

Other contributors to the research from the Department of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise included Valisa Hedrick, associate professor and director of the Dietary Assessment Laboratory; Elena Serrano, professor, Extension specialist, and director of the Virginia Family Nutrition Program; and associate professor Vivica Kraak, who is Stanley's Ph.D. advisor. Adrienne Holz, associate professor in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences' School of Communication also participated in the research.

More information: Katherine Consavage Stanley et al, US Adults' Perceptions, Beliefs, and Behaviors towards Plant-Rich Dietary Patterns and Practices: International Food Information Council Food and Health Survey Insights, 2012–2022, *Nutrients* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/nu15234990](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu15234990)

Provided by Virginia Tech

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