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Trust, Tensions & Tradeoffs: *Perspectives On Food Choices From Parents & Caregivers*

May 2026



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The focus groups described in the *IFIC Trust, Tensions & Tradeoffs: Perspectives On Food Choices From Parents & Caregivers* report were conducted to understand consumer perceptions, trade-offs, and communication needs to improve diet quality. In addition to elevating the consumer voice, these groups aim to identify points of alignment and tension to inform balanced, evidence-based framing for education and communications related to food, nutrition, and health.

Key findings from discussions with **24 American consumers** include:

- Consumers often feel confused, pressured, or unsupported when trying to follow healthy eating advice.
- Families make food decisions through real-world trade-offs across health, convenience, cost, time, and household needs.
- Processed foods are defined and judged in context, with many foods falling into gray areas.
- Efforts to improve diet quality are more likely to help when they offer clearer messaging, usable tools, and realistic upgrades.



METHODOLOGY



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METHODOLOGY

A series of virtual focus groups with 24 American parents and caregivers ages 18 to 65 years with children under 18 years.

Three 90-minute focus groups were conducted between March 10-13, 2026.

All participants were required to keep a 2-day food diary and hold primary or shared responsibility for grocery shopping.

Each group included at least three Millennial parents, with a diverse mix of gender, household income, and ethnicity/race.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

International Food Information Council. Trust, Tensions & Tradeoffs: Perspectives On Food Choices From Parents & Caregivers. May 2026. <https://ific.org/research/perspectives-on-food-choices-from-parents-caregivers/>

All prospective participants were screened for profession, nutrition-related credentials, perceptions of packaged or processed foods, and convenience-driven eating behaviors. Consumers with marketing, nutrition, and public health experience, as well as extreme advocacy or viewpoints were excluded from participating in the focus groups.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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KEY FINDINGS

Consumers are trying to follow healthy eating advice while their food decisions are shaped by daily life.

Across groups, parents and caregivers described healthy eating as something they were trying to do, but not something they could always carry out consistently. Nearly half of the focus group (11 out of 24) said they often fall short of their healthy eating goals. Food choices were often reactive to the demands of the day, rather than proactively planned, with trade-offs around time, cost, energy, availability, and whether a meal would actually get eaten.

Younger parents were especially likely to describe food decisions through the lens of speed, predictability, and managing “in the moment.” Health mattered and usually competed with other priorities. This means diet quality is more likely to improve when guidance helps families make healthier choices under real-life constraints, not when it assumes ideal conditions.

Convenience is critical to improving diet quality. It is one of the main ways busy families make mealtimes more manageable.

Participants often described convenience as a practical solution to stress, competing schedules, mental load, and the effort of getting a meal on the table. Food journals reinforced that quick, portable, easy-to-assemble, and repeatable foods were not just backup choices for unusually chaotic days, but part of the everyday baseline. Households with younger children focused more on “what a child would actually eat” whereas households with teens focused on quantity, schedules, and cost.

Convenience was especially helpful at dinner, when decision fatigue was highest and meals had to satisfy multiple family members at once. For many households, processed and convenient foods remained in the routine because they consistently “worked,” which means diet quality efforts are more likely to succeed when they improve these repeat choices rather than asking families to replace them altogether.

KEY FINDINGS

Consumers do not sort foods into strict “real” vs. “processed” categories. They rely on simple cues to judge what feels acceptable for their family.

Across groups, participants did not use a strict technical definition of “processed” versus “real” food. Instead, they judged foods based on ingredient lists, presence of additives or preservatives, shelf life, and whether a food felt close to its original form.

Many everyday foods fell into a “gray area.” For example, crackers, cereals, canned beans, yogurt, sandwiches, sauces, and mixed meals were evaluated based on usefulness: saving time, reducing waste, fitting family needs, or pairing with other foods to make meals feel balanced. While adding fruits or vegetables could help, it did not necessarily “cancel out” perceptions of processing related to staple, repeatable foods.

There is an opportunity to help consumers choose, combine, and improve the foods they already rely on. Future research could test how consumers compare foods across and within categories, and which cues most influence perceptions of processing while also balancing nutrition composition.

Guidance is more likely to resonate when it helps people make realistic improvements, not perfect choices.

Messages like “eat real food” and “limit processed foods” were familiar, but not overly influential. Participants often soften restrictive guidance into things like moderation, smaller portions, or frequency so it could work for them and their families in daily life.

More motivating guidance felt specific, constructive, and less moralizing. Participants also responded best to guidance that told them what to do, not just what to avoid. Message testing showed that balanced, practical framing performed best because it acknowledged tradeoffs and gave people a more manageable path forward. This means guidance should offer ideas about what to include, not just what to avoid or cut back on.

KEY FINDINGS

Trust is strongest when guidance feels personal, practical, and grounded in real-life needs.

Doctors, pediatricians, nutritionists, and specialists were the most trusted sources because participants saw them as able to offer advice tailored to their own health, their child, or their household situation. Participants responded most positively when guidance felt individualized rather than one-size-fits-all, practical rather than abstract, and helpful in making decisions rather than simply telling them what to avoid.

Trust weakened when information felt vague, generic, inconsistent, overly polished, or agenda-driven. In those situations, some participants defaulted to simpler personal rules (i.e., less processed = healthier) or looked elsewhere for more assistance. This means both the message and the messenger matter: guidance is more likely to influence diet quality when it feels credible, specific, and tailored to the realities people are managing.

The clearest opportunity to improve diet quality is to help people make better use of the foods already in their routine.

Participants were less interested in being warned that processed foods may be problematic and more interested in help decoding what they were already buying for their families. They wanted ingredient lists that were easier to understand, clearer labeling, and more transparency about what products contain. Many also wanted easier labeling, clearer ingredient explanations, and simpler ways to compare options without treating all processed foods equally.

Parents and caregivers responded most positively to ideas that helped them improve familiar routines such as pairing processed foods with fruits, vegetables, or proteins, choosing more healthful versions of staple items, and improving what is already in the cart. This means the most effective tools will help families incrementally improve meal and snack healthfulness in the context of what they already buy and eat, rather than asking them to start completely new behaviors.



DETAILED FINDINGS



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HOW DAILY LIFE INFLUENCES FOOD CHOICES



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People want to eat healthy, yet real life makes things complicated.

Participants described healthy eating as something they try to do, while challenged with doing it consistently.

- Most participants said they were trying to eat healthier.
- At the same time, nearly half (11 out of 24) said they “often” fall short of their healthy eating goals.
- Food choices were shaped by schedules, responsibilities, and energy levels.
- In practice, eating is often more reactive to the day as it plays out, than proactively planned.



My son didn't eat any of the healthy food that was made for lunch... I just ordered a quick cheese pizza because he will eat that.

We're a big sports family, so... we don't always have the time to make dinner.



IFIC INSIGHT: Improving diet quality will require support that fits the realities of daily life, not just advice about ideal choices.

Food decisions are shaped by the realities of the day – and those realities differ across households.

Participants described weighing multiple questions when deciding what to eat, with household type determining which pressures mattered most.



Households with younger children were more likely to weigh health against acceptance, predictability, and avoiding conflict at mealtime.



Households with teens were more likely to weigh health against quantity, cost, and the demands of busier routines.

Will they eat it?


Is this healthy enough for us?

How quickly can I get this on the table?

Can I afford enough of this?

When priorities conflict, “good enough” often wins.

Participants described tradeoffs between health, acceptance, waste, cost, effort, and time.



WASTE

Healthier options were sometimes seen as riskier when waste and cost were concerns.


COST



HEALTH

A meal had to be eaten – not just prepared.


ACCEPTANCE



EFFORT

Simpler options often felt more realistic on busy days.

TIME



IDEAL

“Good enough” was often the practical goal.

WORKABLE

Convenience is one way families made mealtime more manageable.

Participants described convenience as a tool to reduce effort, simplify decisions, and keep the day moving.

Convenience helped during busy days by:

- ✓ Reducing the number of decisions
- ✓ Requiring less preparation and cleanup
- ✓ Helping get meals on the table with less stress
- ✓ Making it easier to meet different household needs



Millennials & Gen Z were more likely to describe “what works right now” and on-the-go decisions.



Convenience for me is just not having to worry about what to make or what to get. I just go and pick it up and then I can eat it.



Gen X were more likely to describe planning, routines, and managing the household.

Family needs and preferences often come first.

Participants described choosing meals based on what the household would accept, even when that meant setting aside their own preferences or ideals.

- A key standard was whether a household would actually eat the food.
- Meals were often designed to be:
 - ✓ Quick enough for the day
 - ✓ Affordable enough for the budget
 - ✓ Acceptable enough to avoid waste or conflict
- Participants often described:
 - ✓ Adjusting expectations for meals and snacks
 - ✓ Making tradeoffs across the week
 - ✓ Monitoring children's intake of certain additives or ingredients more closely than their own



It's not good if I just love it and everybody else doesn't like it.

They are my number one priority... the easy part is when we get takeout, something that we all agree on.



IFIC INSIGHT: Improving diet quality may depend on helping families find options that work for the whole household, not just the individual eater.

Foods that solve everyday problems tend to stay in the routine.

When time or energy were limited, participants returned to foods that were predictable, fast, and easy to prepare or buy.

- These choices appeared most clearly at dinner, when decision fatigue was highest.
- Meals often needed to satisfy multiple people, preferences, and constraints at once.
- Takeout and fast food are reliable problem-solvers, easy for families to agree on, portable, and low-cost.



IFIC INSIGHT: Foods that consistently “work” are likely to stay in the routine, so diet quality efforts should focus on improving those repeat choices.



**Foods shown were repeatedly mentioned in participant food journals; relative font size reflects relative frequency of mentions within this sample.*



HOW PEOPLE DEFINE “REAL” VS “PROCESSED” FOODS



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Simple cues often shape how foods are judged.

Participants relied on things like shelf life, “naturalness,” or ingredients, rather than technical definitions.

- Additives were mentioned in broad categories and were overwhelmingly framed negatively.
- Foods were more likely to be seen as “real” if they:
 - ✓ Were closer to their original form in nature
 - ✓ Have recognizable ingredients or few added ingredients
 - ✓ Had a shorter shelf life
- Foods were more likely to be seen as “processed” if they:
 - ✓ Had long or harder-to-recognize ingredient lists
 - ✓ Contained additives or preservatives
 - ✓ Seemed engineered or highly altered



It has ingredients or preservatives in it, and that makes it last longer, and it's not as healthy.

***How many additives did they put in this?
What are the colorings? What are the flavorings?***



IFIC INSIGHT: Helping people improve diet quality may require translating ingredient and processing terminology and intended use.

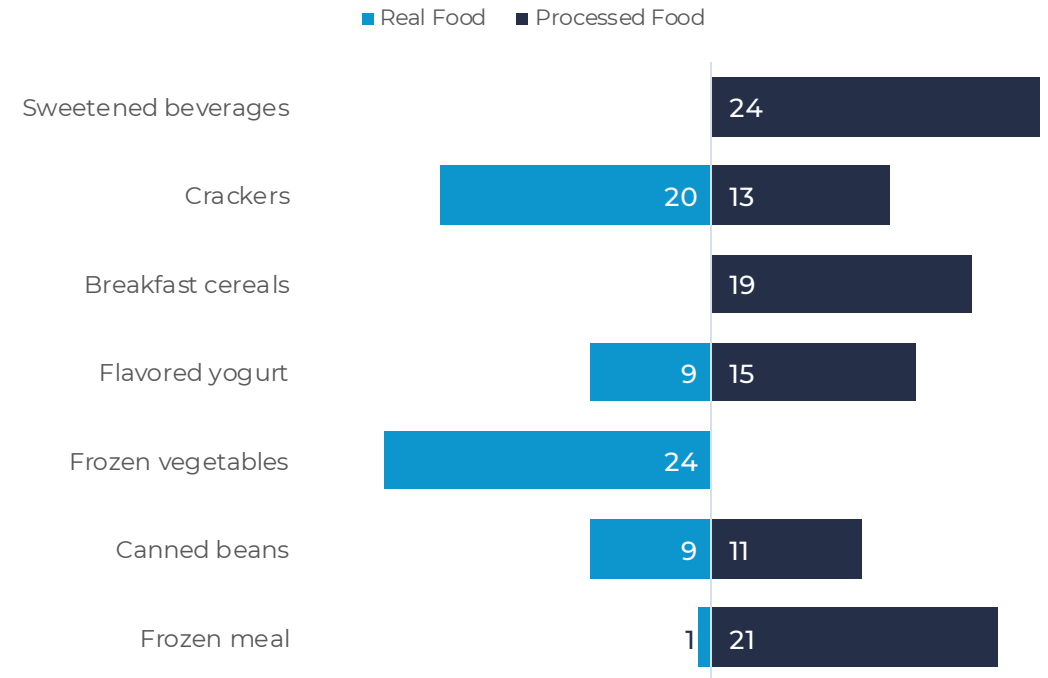
Some processed foods still feel acceptable.

Even when a food was seen as “processed,” participants often accepted it if it worked for their family.

- Foods were often judged based on what they were and what they helped families do.
- Adding fruits or vegetables could make a meal feel more balanced, but it did not necessarily “cancel out” perceptions of processing related to staple foods.
- Processed foods were more likely to feel acceptable when they:
 - ✓ Supported nutrition
 - ✓ Reduced waste
 - ✓ Saved time
 - ✓ Helped get children to eat

Participants Classifying Each Item As Processed Food Or Real Food

*Out of 24 participants



**Some participants were uncertain in their rating of “processed” vs. “real”. Hand raise counts should be used as directional, not quantitative insights. (n=24)*



THE SAY-DO GAP



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What people describe and what they do are not always the same.

Food journals reinforced the role of convenience, yet showed it was more routine than participants often described.

What Showed Up In Food Journals

- Consumers had repeated reliance on foods that are quick, portable, already prepared, or easy to assemble.
- Eating patterns were shaped by work, errands, travel, school pickups, children's schedules.
- Convenience showed up as part of the everyday baseline, not just as an occasional exception.

What Was Said In Focus Groups

- Convenience was often described as something used on rushed or imperfect days.
- Processed foods were often framed as compromises, not routine building blocks.
- Participants often talked about these foods more critically than their journals suggested.



IFIC INSIGHT: Food journals suggest that improving diet quality starts with everyday eating patterns.

Even those critical of processed foods regularly rely on them.

Participants often expressed concerns about processed foods, yet their day-to-day eating still relied on them.

What Showed Up In Food Journals

- Processed foods appeared regularly across meals and snacks (e.g., cereal, bars, crackers, chips, fries, nuggets, pizza, takeout, fast food, sweetened drinks, frozen foods, sandwiches).
- “Better” or more balanced meals still depended on processed building blocks.
- Meals often combined fresher foods with processed items, rather than replacing processed foods altogether.

What Was Said In Focus Groups

- Processed foods were often described as something people tried to limit.
- Processed foods were often framed as responses to busy or changing situations.
- Processed foods were rarely described as a routine foundation of everyday meals.



IFIC INSIGHT: Diet quality may improve more by helping people make better use of processed foods than by telling them to avoid them altogether.

Higher-pressure households show the widest say-do gap.

The gap was less about beliefs and more about how strongly food decisions were constrained by the demands of daily life, including parents' work schedules, children's needs, and household budgets.

Where The Gap Showed Up Most Clearly

- **Younger-child households** were more likely to rely on quick substitutions, repeat fallback meals, and child-acceptable options.
- **Participants who were “trying but struggling” or “often feel confused”** about healthier eating were more likely to describe healthy eating intentions in discussion, while their journals showed more unevenness and reliance on convenience options.
- In these cases, the gap reflected the pressure of managing the day, not a lack of interest in improving diet quality per se.



IFIC INSIGHT: Diet quality may improve most when support is designed for the moments where people feel most constrained, not just the moments where they feel most motivated.



REACTIONS TO GUIDANCE & MESSAGING



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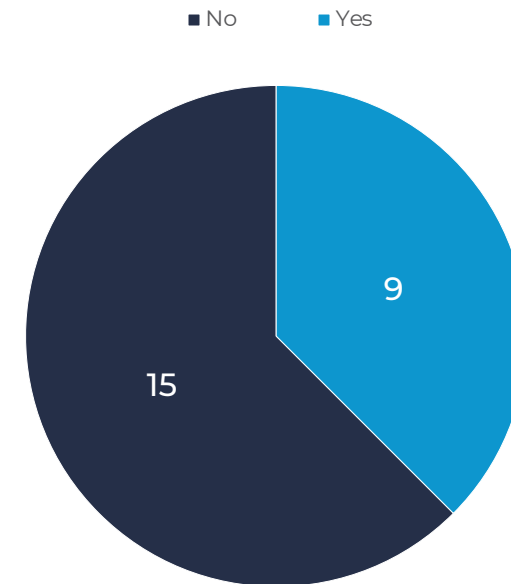
Messages like “eat real food” are familiar, yet not especially influential.

Participants had heard messages like “eat real food” and “limit processed foods,” judging them based on whether they felt such messaging to be realistic in daily life.

- Many had heard these messages from doctors, media, or social platforms.
- Advice often felt:
 - ✓ Easier to agree with in theory
 - ✓ Harder to act on consistently
- Most (62%) said advice to “eat real food” or “limit processed foods” would not change how they think about processed foods.

Does messaging to “eat real food” or “limit processed food” change your opinion of processed foods?

Out of 24 participants



*Q: What have you heard, if anything, about recommendations to “eat real food” or “limit processed foods”? Does it change your opinion of processed foods?
Hand raise counts should be used as directional, not quantitative insights. (n=24)*

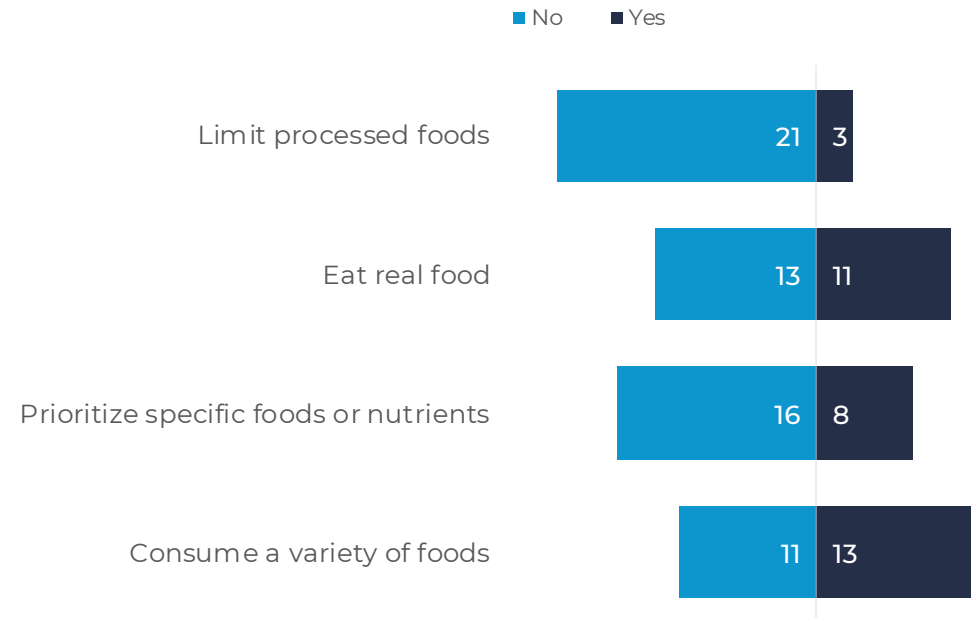
Terms like “limit” are interpreted as moderation, not elimination.

Participants often converted restrictive language into simpler, more workable rules for their family.

- “Limit” was commonly interpreted as:
 - ✓ Moderation
 - ✓ Frequency control
 - ✓ Smaller portions
- Restrictive language was often adapted into workable “rules of thumb” due to:
 - ✓ Time constraints
 - ✓ Cost and waste
 - ✓ Children’s preferences
 - ✓ Access and availability

Which terminology feels motivating (or more realistic) for you?

**Out of 24 participants*



**Some participants were uncertain in their rating. Hand raise counts should be used as directional, not quantitative insights. (n=24)*

Tone matters: some messages create pressure or guilt.

Guidance focused on variety or specific nutrients was more motivating than messages about limiting foods.

What Doesn't Work

Guidance felt harder to use when it was:

- Too absolute or restrictive
- Too vague or inconsistent
- Disconnected from daily life

What Works Better

Guidance felt more helpful when it was:

- Practical and specific
- Flexible and realistic
- Focused on what to do (not just what to avoid)



Gen Z and Millennials, especially parents of younger children, were more likely to react to food guidance in terms of pressure, realism, and emotional load. They often seemed highly aware of the gap between what the message says and what daily life allows.



Gen X participants were also sensitive to tone, but they were somewhat more likely to interpret and reframe the guidance. They often translated “limit” into moderation or sorted through what part of the advice seemed usable versus not.

Three messages were tested to understand what resonates.

Participants reacted to three statements about processed foods and healthy eating, including which felt most realistic and motivating. One statement (B) was slightly adapted in the third focus group to add a more concrete meal-building example.

A

Broad, Neutral Framing

Foods play different roles in our lives. Some help nourish us day to day, and others help us celebrate, connect, and enjoy special moments.

B

Balanced, Practical Framing

Processed foods can be part of a well-balanced diet. They can help families make healthy eating more manageable, especially on busy days.

Processed foods can be part of a well-balanced diet. Pairing them with foods like fruits and vegetables can make it easier to create nutritious meals for your family - especially on busy days.

C

Restrictive Framing

The more processed a food is, the less healthy it becomes. Parents should limit processed foods in their child's diet.

Note: Statement B was tested in a slightly more specific form in the third focus group, adding a concrete example about pairing processed foods with fruits and vegetables.

Different message types resonate for different reasons.

The most effective messages balanced realism with guidance, acknowledging constraints while still helping people make decisions. Balanced framing worked best when it acknowledged constraints and, in the third focus group, become more concrete about what to do.

A

Relatable, Less Directional

- ✓ Felt human and non-judgmental
- ✓ Reduced resistance
- ✓ Appealed more to those resistant to the word “processed”
- ✓ Was less specific or memorable

B

Most Aligned To Real Life

- ✓ Felt practical and manageable
- ✓ Reflected balance rather than perfection
- ✓ Became stronger when it included a more concrete “how”
- ✓ Resonated most with Millennials and busy parents
- ✓ Sometimes sounded too close to defending processed foods

C

Clear, Heavy Tone

- ✓ Validated existing concerns for some
- ✓ Could increase emotional burden
- ✓ Appealed more to those already cautious about processed foods
- ✓ Often felt absolute, vague, or guilt-inducing

Messages that reflect real life are more likely to resonate.

The strongest messages acknowledged trade-offs and offered a workable path forward.

- Balanced framing performed best overall, especially when it felt realistic, manageable, and concrete.
- More restrictive framing validated some concerns, yet often felt too heavy, vague, or guilt-inducing.
- Broad, neutral framing felt safer and less polarizing, yet also less directive.

- **Statement B:** Strongest overall appeal (tested in a slightly more specific form in Focus Group 3)
- **Statement A:** generated the least resistance
- **Statement C:** pockets of support, but not broad appeal



IFIC INSIGHT: The strongest messages acknowledge real-life constraints and were most persuasive when they also offered a practical path forward.

Note: Interpret Statement B directionally. In the third focus group, it was tested in a slightly more specific form that added a concrete meal-building example.

Trust is strongest when guidance feels personal, practical, and usable.

Participants were looking for help making decisions. They wanted guidance that works in real life, not language that adds pressure or confusion.

- Doctors, pediatricians, dietitians/nutritionists, and specialists were the most trusted sources of food and nutrition information.
- Trust was strongest when guidance felt:
 - ✓ Personalized to individual needs
 - ✓ Practical and easy to apply
 - ✓ Independent or unbiased
- When formal guidance felt unclear or generic, some participants looked elsewhere or defaulted to simpler rules (e.g., “less processed is probably better”).

“**Definitely talking to your pediatrician for my kids or your primary care doctor to figure out, based off blood results and everything else, do I need to eat more foods high in vitamin D or C.**

My nutritionist, without a doubt.

Because your doctor is monitoring your health... it's not a one size [fits all].



WHAT WOULD ACTUALLY HELP IMPROVE DIET QUALITY



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Improving diet quality starts with making choices easier to interpret.

Participants were less interested in more warnings and more interested in clearer ways to compare foods, interpret labels, and make better choices within familiar categories.

- Participants wanted clearer ways to interpret labels and understand the purpose of ingredients.
- Many viewed foods on a spectrum and wanted better distinctions among foods, rather than a single “processed foods” category.
- Several mentioned tools or apps like Yuka because they offer quick, in-the-moment help decoding products while shopping.

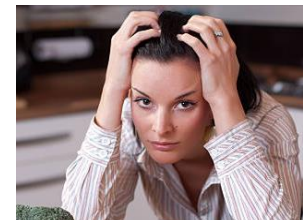


Those who felt they were already eating better or felt successful with their healthy eating habits wanted more help refining choices.



It's very hard to decode food. As a customer, I would like more transparency.

It shouldn't take a scientist to read a label that you're feeding yourself and your children.

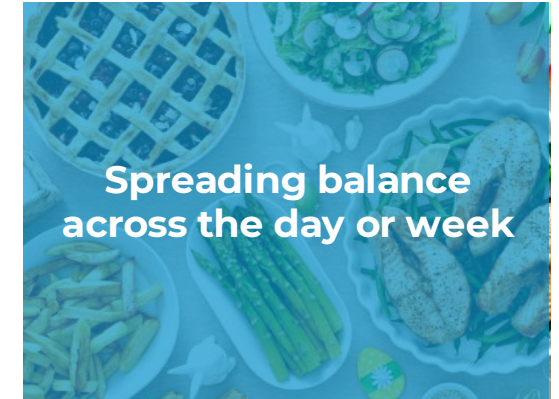
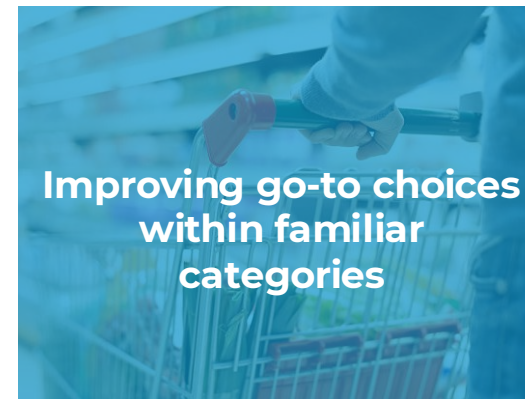
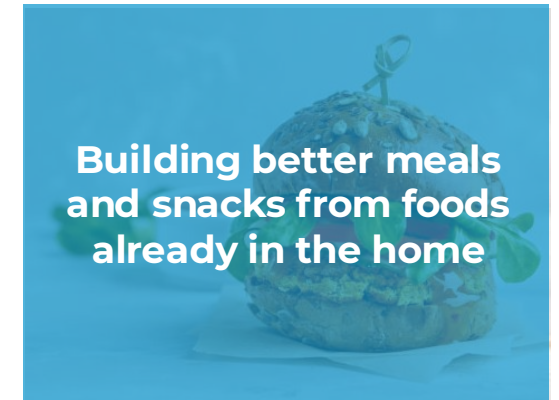


Those who felt they were struggling wanted help making everyday basics easier.

Better diet quality feels more achievable when information is translated into small, realistic upgrades.

Participants responded best to ideas that helped them improve familiar routines through swaps, pairings, and manageable choices.

- What people seemed to want was clearer translation, not more information.
- Guidance felt more useful when it helped people improve familiar routines.
- Practical swaps and pairing ideas felt more realistic than strict compliance language.
- Tools were most appealing when they reduced decision burden – for example, comparison cues, label/ingredient explainers, meal plans and shopping guides.



The clearest opportunities make healthy eating easier to understand and easier to act on.

Across groups, people wanted support that simplified decisions and helped make better choices.

Messaging

- ✓ Use practical, non-judgmental language
- ✓ Acknowledge time, cost, acceptance, and convenience as real parts of the decision
- ✓ Focus on what to do, not only what to avoid

Frameworks

- ✓ Offer simple ways to compare options within categories
- ✓ Help people think in terms of “better,” “balanced,” and “works for my family”
- ✓ Support small improvements rather than all-or-nothing choices

Tools

- ✓ Show pairings, swaps, upgrades, and meal-building ideas that fit everyday routines
- ✓ Make labels and ingredients easier to interpret
- ✓ Provide help for shopping and feeding a family at the point-of-sale or purchase (retail and away from home)

What This Could Look Like

- ✓ **On-label and on-menu communication as well as digital guidance in plain language, including food retail e-commerce**
- ✓ **Meal-building ideas using familiar foods**
- ✓ **Better-within-category upgrades or swaps**
- ✓ **Shortcuts for planning, shopping, preparing meals, and feeding a family**



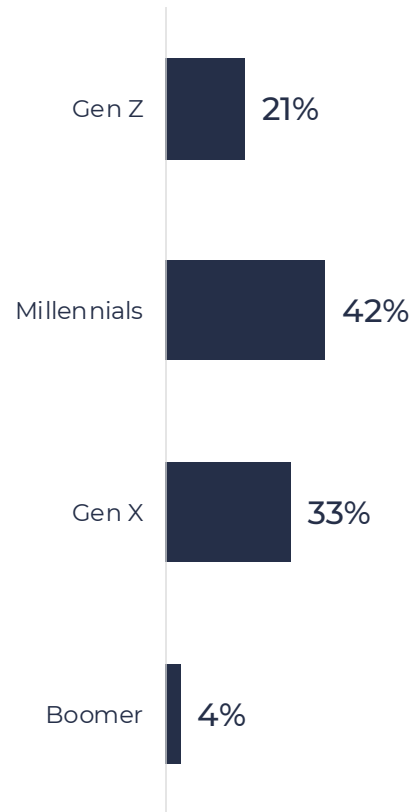
DEMOGRAPHICS



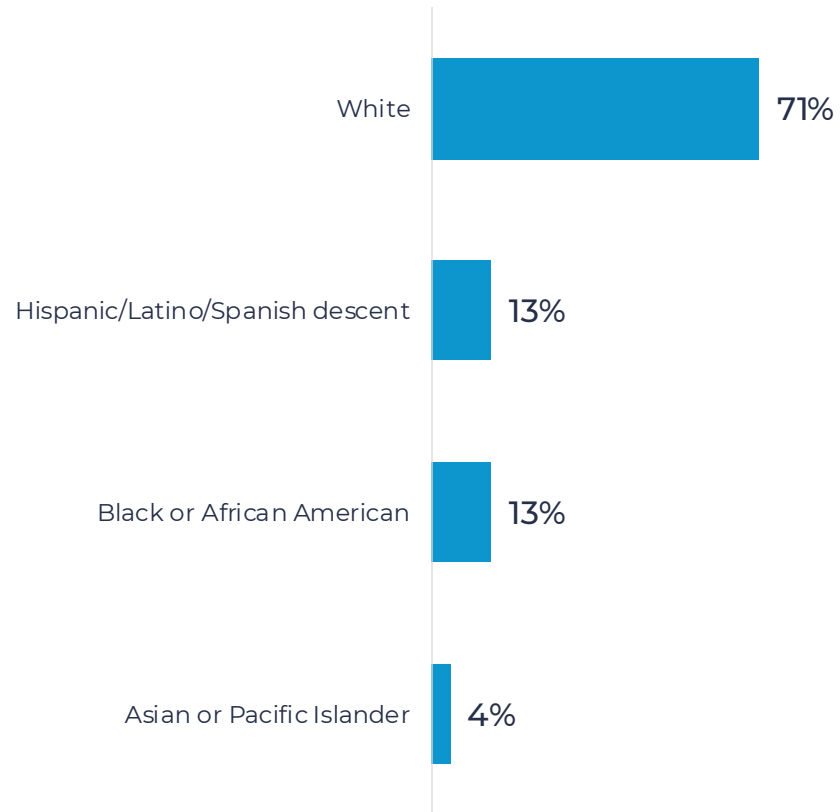
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Demographics

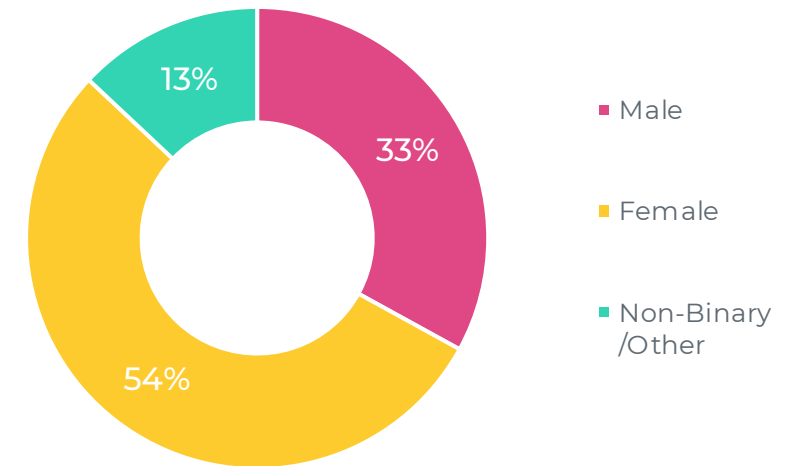
GENERATION



RACE/ETHNICITY



GENDER



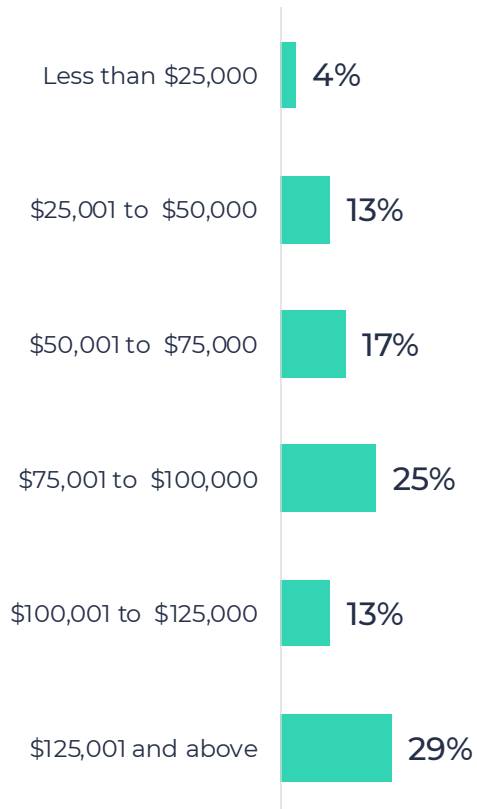
Q2. What is your current age? [Generation] (n=24)

Q4. Which of the following do you most identify as? [Race/Ethnicity] (n=24)

Q5. Are you? [Gender] (n=24)

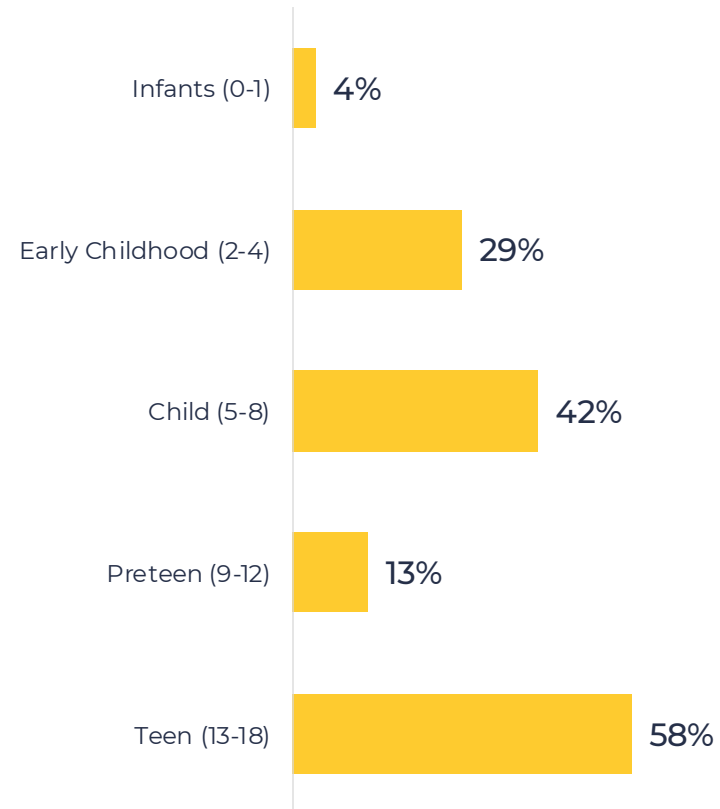
Demographics

INCOME



Q6. Which of the following best describes your household income in 2025? [Income] (n=24)

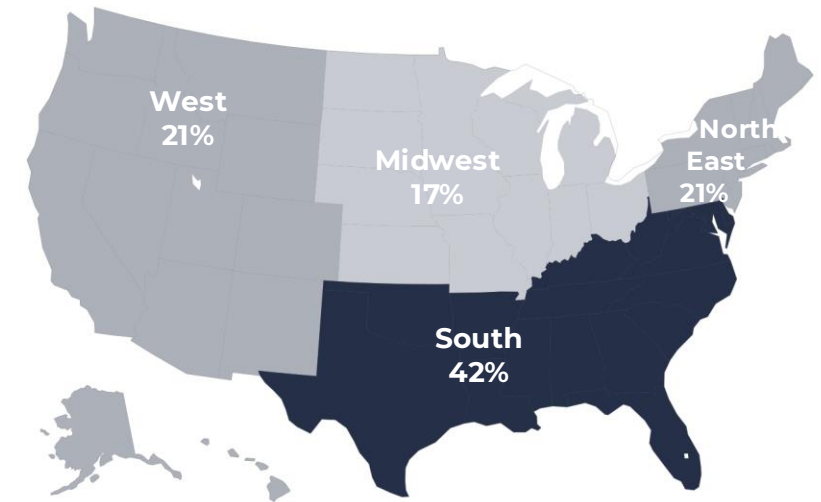
AGE OF CHILDREN



Q3. What are the current ages of your children? [Age Of Children] (n=24)

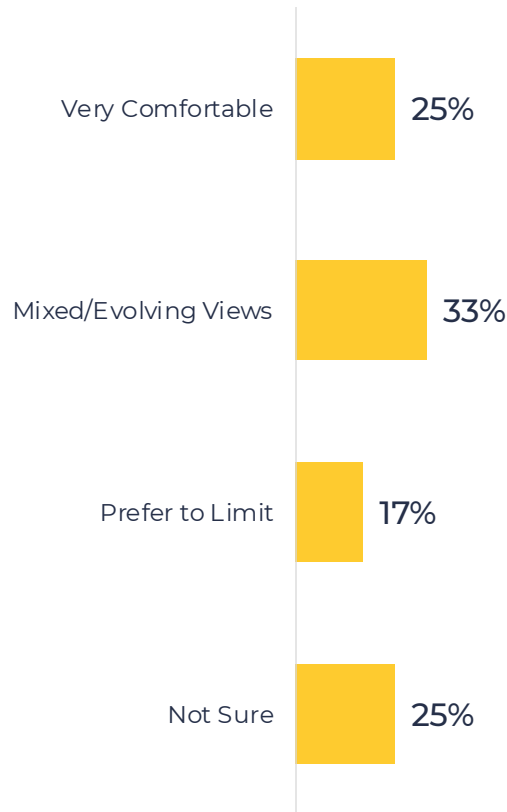
Q15. What do you consider to be your primary ZIP code? [Region] (n=24)

REGION

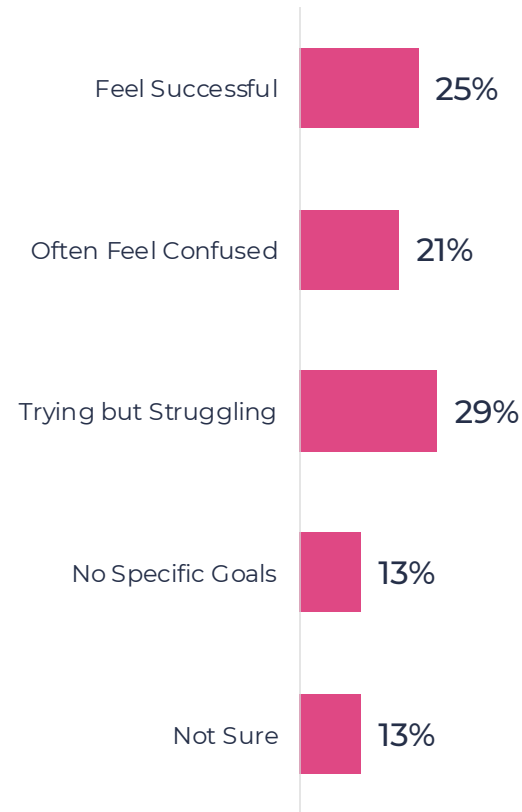


Demographics

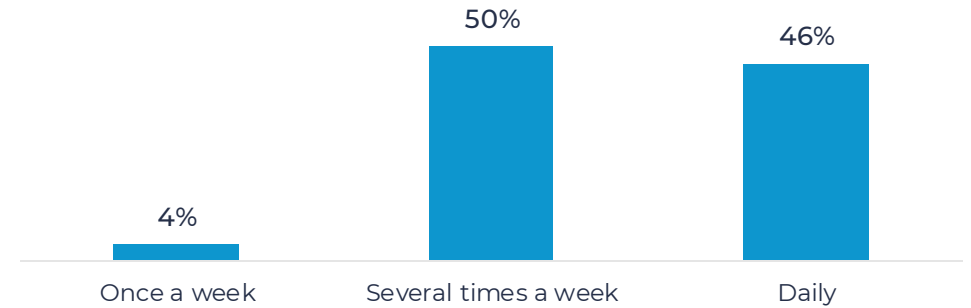
PROCESSED FOOD VIEW



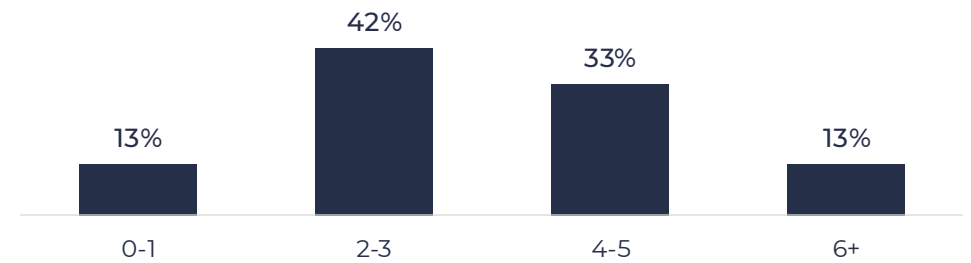
HEALTHY EATING GOALS



FREQUENCY OF SNACKING



NUMBER OF FRUITS/VEGETABLES PER DAY



Q12. Which statement best reflects your view on processed or packaged foods? [Processed Foods View] (n=24)

Q14. What statement comes closest to your view? [Healthy Eating Goals] (n=24)

Q10. During a typical week, how often do you have meals or snacks where time, convenience, or ease is the main reason for why you choose to eat? [Frequency Of Snacking] (n=24)

Q13. On a typical day, how many servings of fruits and vegetables do you typically eat? [Number Of Fruits/Vegetables Per Day] (n=24)



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