



**SPOTLIGHT
SURVEY**

Americans' Perceptions of Protein Quality & Labeling

April 2026



METHODOLOGY



The International Food Information Council (IFIC) commissioned an online survey among U.S. consumers to measure knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about protein quality & protein labeling. One thousand seventeen adults ages 18 years and older completed the online survey from November 17-26, 2025, and were weighted to ensure proportional results.

The Bayesian confidence level for the survey sample (n=1017) is 3.5, which is roughly equivalent to a margin of error of ± 3.1 at the 95% confidence level. Callouts of statistically significant results are included where appropriate on slides displaying results. Something is statistically significant if the result cannot be attributed to random chance. Statistical significance in this report is only compared within each demographic group (e.g. age, race, gender, etc.).

Totals of survey results presented in this report may not add up or equal 100% due to rounding.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: International Food Information Council (IFIC). IFIC Spotlight Survey: Americans' Perceptions of Protein Quality & Labeling. April 2026.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Protein has emerged as one of the most prominent nutrition topics, increasingly shaping how Americans define healthy eating. And interest shows no signs of slowing.

According to the [2025 IFIC Food & Health Survey](#), “good source of protein” is now the most common criterion Americans use to define a healthy food, a high-protein diet has been the most widely followed eating pattern for three consecutive years, and protein has ranked as the nutrient Americans are most actively trying to consume for five years running.

This growing focus on protein is also reflected in national nutrition guidance. The recently released [Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025–2030](#), emphasize the importance of including a variety of protein foods in the diet and recommend higher protein intakes than previous U.S. dietary guidance.

Scientific discussions about protein often refer to its quality. In nutrition science, [protein quality](#) refers to a food’s ability to meet human amino acid and nitrogen requirements. High-quality protein sources are determined by [objective measures](#) such as amino acid content, digestibility, bioavailability, and the ability to build new proteins in the body. Food sources such as dairy, eggs, fish, meats, soy, and quinoa are examples of high-quality protein foods.

However, communicating the scientific nuances of protein quality to the public can be challenging, given the associations people may have with the term “quality.” This *IFIC Spotlight Survey: Americans’ Perceptions of Protein Quality & Labeling* examines how Americans interpret protein-related messages, food labeling, and other types of protein information. As protein continues to dominate the nutrition conversation, these findings highlight opportunities for food and nutrition professionals to provide personalized education and messaging to help consumers make more informed food choices related to their protein needs.

SOURCE: IFIC Spotlight Survey: Americans’ Perceptions of Protein Quality & Labeling. April 2026.



KEY FINDINGS

Price and taste dominate food choices, with convenience, health, labeling information, and values playing secondary roles.

Taste and price and taste overwhelmingly shape food and beverage choices, a consistent finding in two decades of the annual [IFIC Food & Health Survey](#). Results from this *IFIC Spotlight Survey*, reinforce that pattern, highlighting how Americans prioritize value and enjoyment when making food decisions.

Three in four say price or value (75%) and taste or flavor (72%) influence their choices. Nearly half (44%) also cite their family's preferences or needs, underscoring how grocery decisions often reflect household priorities. Convenience or ease of preparation (38%), nutrition or healthfulness (37%), and expiration date or shelf life (37%) also rank highly, suggesting Americans are weighing both practicality and product longevity.

About a third of consumers (32%) say the Nutrition Facts label, ingredient list, or other labeling information influences what ends up in their grocery carts. Values-driven considerations rank lower, including reducing food waste (18%), supporting fitness goals (17%), and environmental sustainability (13%). Overall, the findings suggest a clear hierarchy: Americans prioritize taste and price first, then factor in household needs, health, and convenience.

Two in three Americans report looking for some type of nutrition information on the front of food packaging when shopping.

Front-of-package information captures the attention of many American shoppers, though the specific details they seek vary. In this *IFIC Spotlight Survey*, one in three Americans (36%) say they look for front-of-package nutrition summaries (e.g., Facts up Front), when shopping for food and beverages. At the same time, an equal share (36%) report they do not look for front-of-package information when they shop, highlighting a clear divide between label-engaged shoppers and those who rely on other cues to inform their food and beverage choices.

Among specific claim types, health claims (e.g., heart healthy) are the most widely noticed (34%), followed by content claims (e.g., high in fiber) at 30%. "Free from" claims (e.g., gluten-free) draw attention from one-quarter of shoppers (25%), while structure function claims (e.g., calcium helps build strong bones) linking nutrients to specific health states are cited by 24%.

Overall, the results suggest front-of-package information resonates with a substantial share of shoppers, though engagement is uneven: about two-thirds (64%) say they look for some type of front-of-pack information, while 36% do not.

KEY FINDINGS

Eight in ten Americans report looking for some type of nutrition information on the back or side of food packaging when shopping.

While front-of-package claims can grab attention, many shoppers still turn to the back or side of the package for additional details. In this *IFIC Spotlight Survey*, calories are the most commonly sought detail, cited by 40% of Americans when reviewing back or side-of-pack labels. Close behind are sugars (total or added) at 38%, followed by protein (37%).

About one-third of consumers check the ingredients list (33%) and/or sodium content (31%), suggesting shoppers are paying attention both to what's in their food and to nutrients they may be trying to limit. Vitamins and minerals (29%), fat content (26%), and/or total carbohydrates (25%) also rank among the commonly reviewed details, while fiber (22%) and cholesterol (21%) draw somewhat less attention.

More technical information, such as percent Daily Value (%DV), is consulted by fewer shoppers (14%), and allergen statements by 11%. Notably, one in five Americans (21%) say they do not look for back- or side-of-package information when shopping.

Among those who look for protein information on the back or side of food packaging, the most helpful details are protein sources and amounts, including contribution to daily protein needs.

Among survey respondents who say they check protein information on the back or side of food packaging, clarity about sources and amounts is a top desire. More than half (55%) say it would be most helpful for protein sources to be clearly listed in the ingredients, while a similar share (52%) points to the amount of protein shown on the Nutrition Facts label. Nearly half (49%) also want the protein content highlighted on the front of the package, suggesting consumers value quick, easy-to-spot cues.

Many Americans are also looking for context around how foods contribute to their overall diet and nutrient needs. About half (47%) say it would be helpful to see how much a food contributes toward their daily protein needs.

More technical protein information, which is not currently on food packaging, draws somewhat less interest. Roughly one in three say it would be helpful to know if a food contains all essential amino acids in the right amounts for their needs (36%) or how easily they can absorb and use the protein (35%). Fewer prioritize statements about protein's benefits (29%) or specific amino acid content (23%).

KEY FINDINGS

Four in ten Americans associate “high-quality protein” with good taste.

Americans’ views of what defines a “high-quality protein” extend well beyond protein content alone. In this *IFIC Spotlight Survey*, taste emerges as the most widely cited signal, with 40% equating a high-quality protein with tasting good. One-third (33%) also associate high-quality protein with containing a certain amount of protein per serving.

Many consumers link high-quality protein with broader attributes often associated with less processed foods. About three in ten say a high-quality protein is free from additives or artificial ingredients (29%), provides other important nutrients such as vitamins and minerals (29%), or comes from a natural or whole food source (28%). Digestibility (27%) and minimal processing (26%) also rank highly, suggesting that both how a protein food is produced and how the body uses it shape perceptions of quality.

Performance-related attributes also factor in for some consumers: 25% connect high-quality protein with supporting muscle building and repair, and 23% with providing all essential amino acids in the right amounts. Fewer respondents define high-quality protein by its source (19% animal, 11% plant), scientific validation (15%), or premium price (9%).

Most Americans believe the term “protein quality” refers to healthfulness and ability to support muscle health.

Americans’ understanding of the term “protein quality” spans several concepts, though two interpretations rise to the top: overall healthfulness and ability to support muscle health. In *this IFIC Spotlight Survey*, 39% say higher protein quality means the food is healthier, while 37% associate it with better support for muscle health.

Other interpretations reflect a mix of sensory, nutritional, and functional considerations. More than one in four respondents (27%) believe higher-quality protein tastes better. A similar share (27%) associate quality with the presence of essential amino acids in the right amounts, while 26% link it to digestibility—how easily it can be absorbed and used.

Fewer Americans connect protein quality with price (19%), reinforcing a broader survey finding that Americans do not necessarily view cost as a signal of higher-quality protein. Even fewer link protein quality with convenience, such as how long a product stays good for (7%), or with environmental sustainability (6%).

KEY FINDINGS

Most Americans believe the body uses protein differently depending on the food source.

Most Americans believe the body may use protein differently depending on the food source. More than seven in ten respondents (71%) say protein from different foods (e.g., beans, dairy, eggs, meat, seafood, or soy) is used differently by the body to some degree. About four in ten (38%) say they definitely believe protein is used differently depending on the source, while another one-third (33%) think there may be some differences.

Far fewer Americans believe protein functions the same regardless of where it comes from. Just 16% say the body uses protein the same way regardless of source. Meanwhile, 13% say they are unsure.

“High-quality protein” and “protein supports overall health” resonate with Americans more than other protein-related claims.

Americans respond most strongly to simple quality- and overall health-oriented protein messaging on food packaging. In this *IFIC Spotlight Survey*, respondents were asked to rank their top two most meaningful phrases from six protein-related claims. “High-quality protein” emerges as the most meaningful overall, with 27% selecting it as their top choice and 47% placing it among their top two.

“Protein supports overall health” ranks next in overall resonance, selected by 42% of respondents among their top two most meaningful phrases, including 20% who say it would be the single most meaningful claim.

Other phrases generate more moderate interest. About one-third of consumers (34%) place “complete protein” among their top two, while 29% say the same for “protein supports muscle health.” More technical descriptions resonate with fewer Americans: “easily absorbed protein” and “protein with all essential amino acids” are each selected by 24% of respondents as one of their two most meaningful phrases.

KEY FINDINGS

Americans report regularly consuming soy foods and beverages and recognize the health benefits of soy protein.

Results from this *IFIC Spotlight Survey* suggest Americans generally hold positive views of soy foods and beverages, and soy protein.

Perceptions of soy's health benefits are largely favorable. About half of Americans believe soy protein is a high-quality protein (52%) and that it is good for heart health (52%). Similar shares say soy protein supports muscle health (50%) and helps maintain a healthy body weight (51%). Nearly half (49%) also believe soy foods and beverages support overall health.

At the same time, many Americans remain unsure about soy's specific health benefits. Roughly four in ten (33%-41%) neither agree nor disagree with several statements about soy protein, suggesting some uncertainty or limited familiarity with its health attributes.

Concerns about soy appear more limited by comparison. While 42% express concerns about consuming soy foods and beverages, 24% do not share those concerns, and one-third (33%) remain neutral.

Protein content claims and overall protein quality information resonate more with Americans than amino acid measures.

When choosing protein foods, Americans tend to prioritize clear, more applicable information on packaging. When asked to select meaningful information from a list of seven protein-related items, more than four in ten point to the total protein content listed on the package (45%), a "good source of protein" claim (45%), and/or the percentage of daily protein needs the product provides (41%). About one-third of respondents (35%) say information about the overall quality of the protein is meaningful when choosing protein foods.

Interest declines as the information becomes more technical. Even fewer prioritize more specialized measures, such as a protein quality score based on amino acid content and digestibility (24%) or a list of essential amino acids and their amounts (23%).

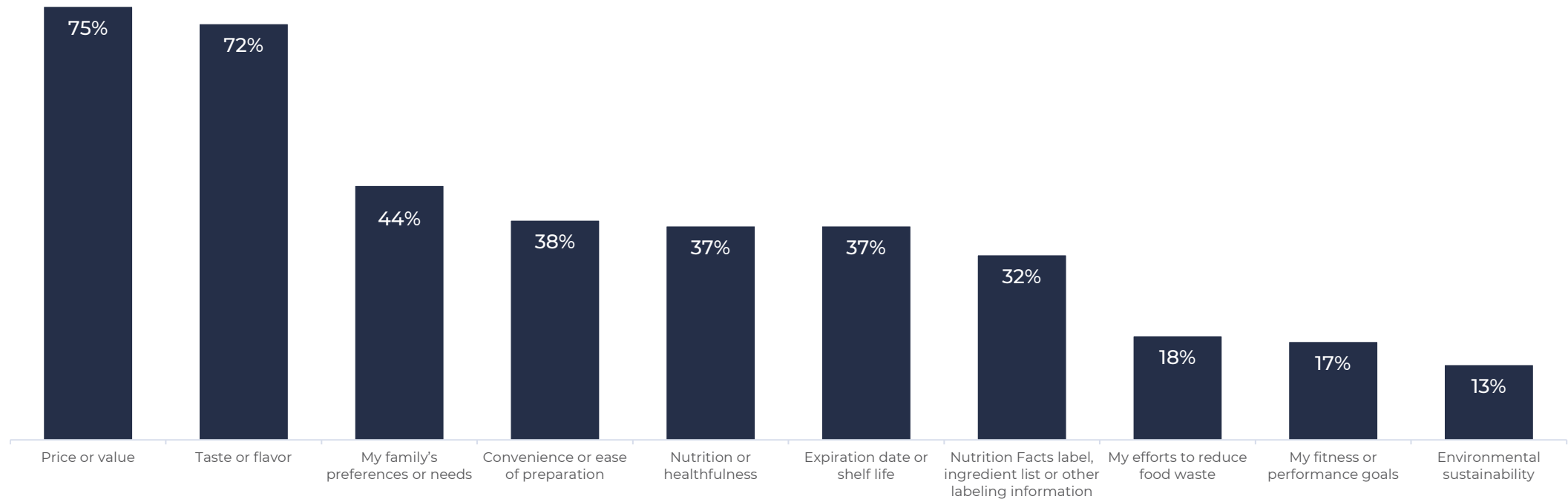
Highly specific details resonate with the smallest share of Americans. Just 16% say the presence of particular amino acids, such as leucine, is meaningful when selecting protein foods.

Overall, the findings suggest Americans gravitate toward simple cues that clearly communicate how much protein a product provides and how it contributes to their daily nutritional needs, rather than more technical indicators of protein quality.

Price and taste dominate food choices, with convenience, health, labeling information, and values playing secondary roles.

Price (75%) and taste (72%) are dominant drivers of food choices, far outweighing factors such as family preferences (44%), convenience (38%), and/or health-related considerations such as nutrition (37%), or labeling information (32–37%). In contrast, food waste (18%), fitness goals (17%), and/or sustainability (13%) play an even smaller role.

Factors Influencing Food & Beverage Purchases



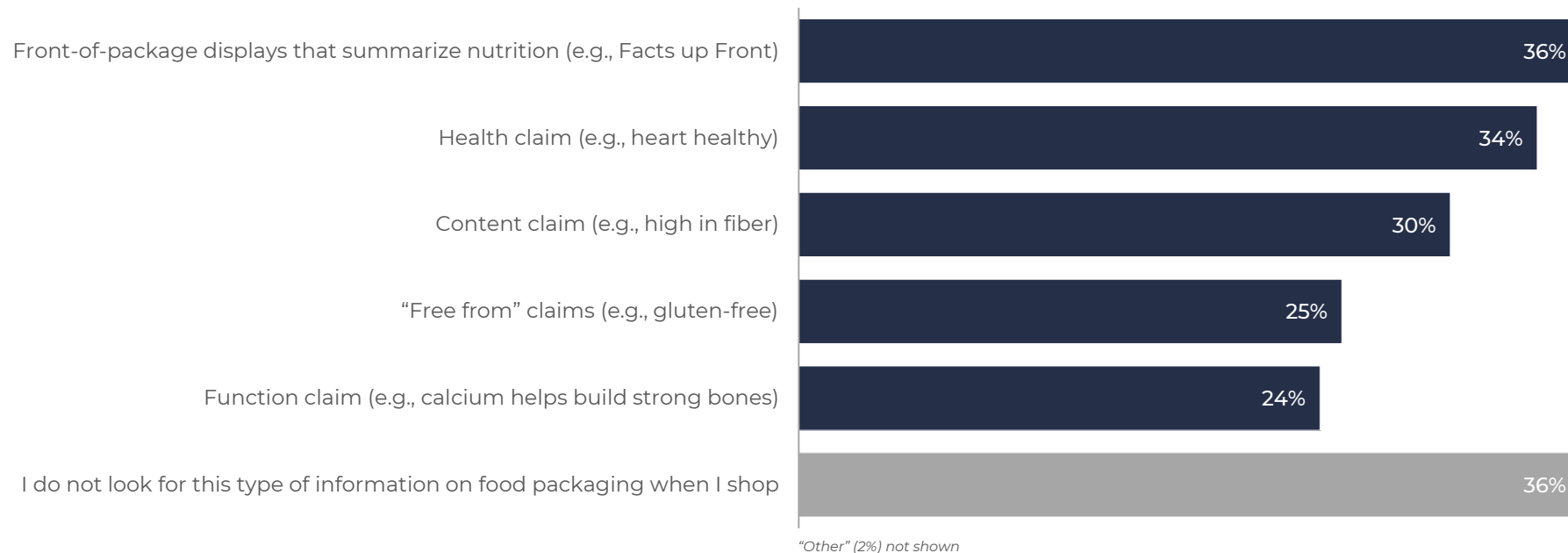
Q1. When shopping for food and beverages, which of the following factors most influences your product selection? Select all that apply. (n=1017)

IFIC Spotlight Survey: Americans' Perceptions of Protein Quality & Labeling. April 2026.

Two in three Americans report looking for some type of nutrition information on the front of food packaging when shopping.

More than one-third look for nutrition summaries such as Facts up Front (36%) and/or health claims such as “heart healthy” (34%) on the front of food packaging, while an equal share (36%) say they do not look for this type of information.

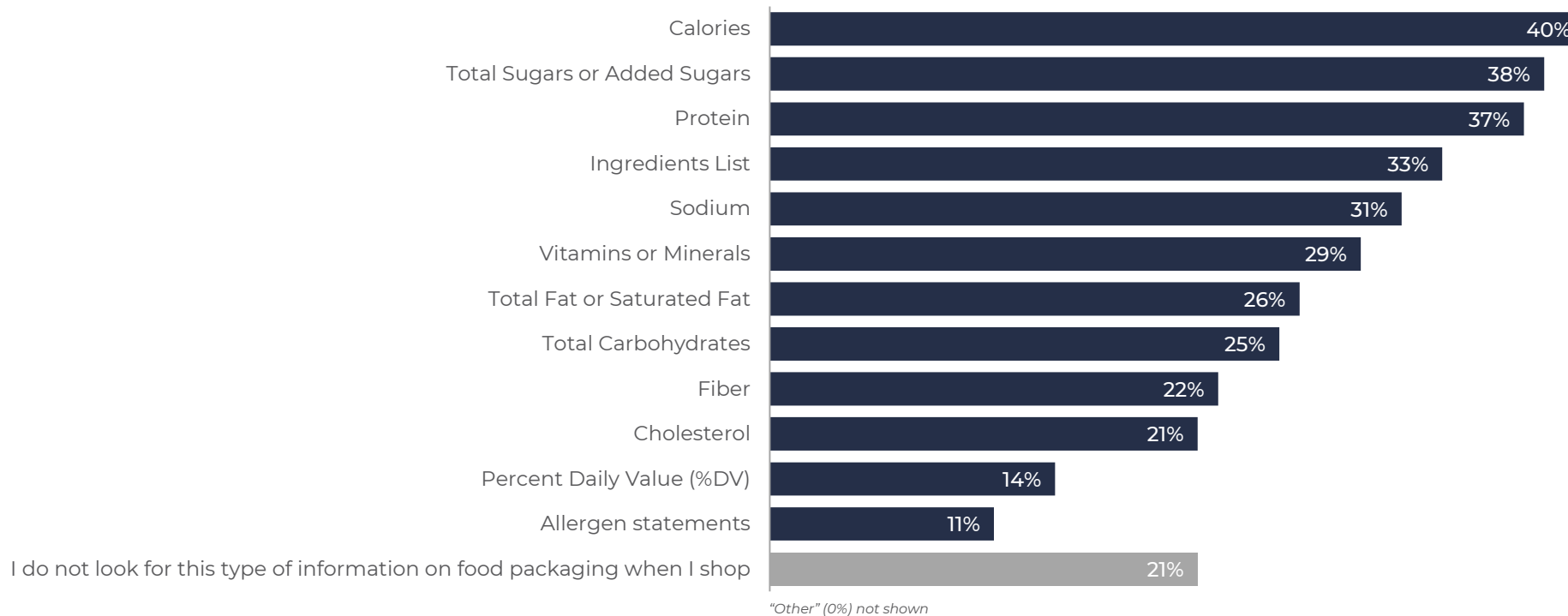
Nutrition Information Americans Look For On The Front Of Food Packaging



Eight in ten Americans report looking for some type of nutrition information on the back or side of food packaging when shopping.

About four in ten check calories (40%), total or added sugars (38%), and/or protein (37%) on the back or side of food packaging. Fewer than one in four look for fiber (22%), cholesterol (21%), percent Daily Value (14%), and/or allergen statements (11%). Two in ten (21%) say they do not look for this type of information.

Nutrition Information Americans Look For On The Back Or Side Of Food Packaging



Among those who look for protein information on the back or side of food packaging, the most helpful details are protein sources and amounts, including contribution to daily protein needs.

About half say it is helpful to see protein sources clearly listed in the ingredients (55%), the amount of protein on the Nutrition Facts label (52%), the protein amount displayed on the front of the package (49%), and/or how much the product contributes to daily protein needs (47%). In contrast, fewer say amino acid and/or protein utilization details would be helpful (36% or less).

Protein Information Americans Look For On Food Packaging

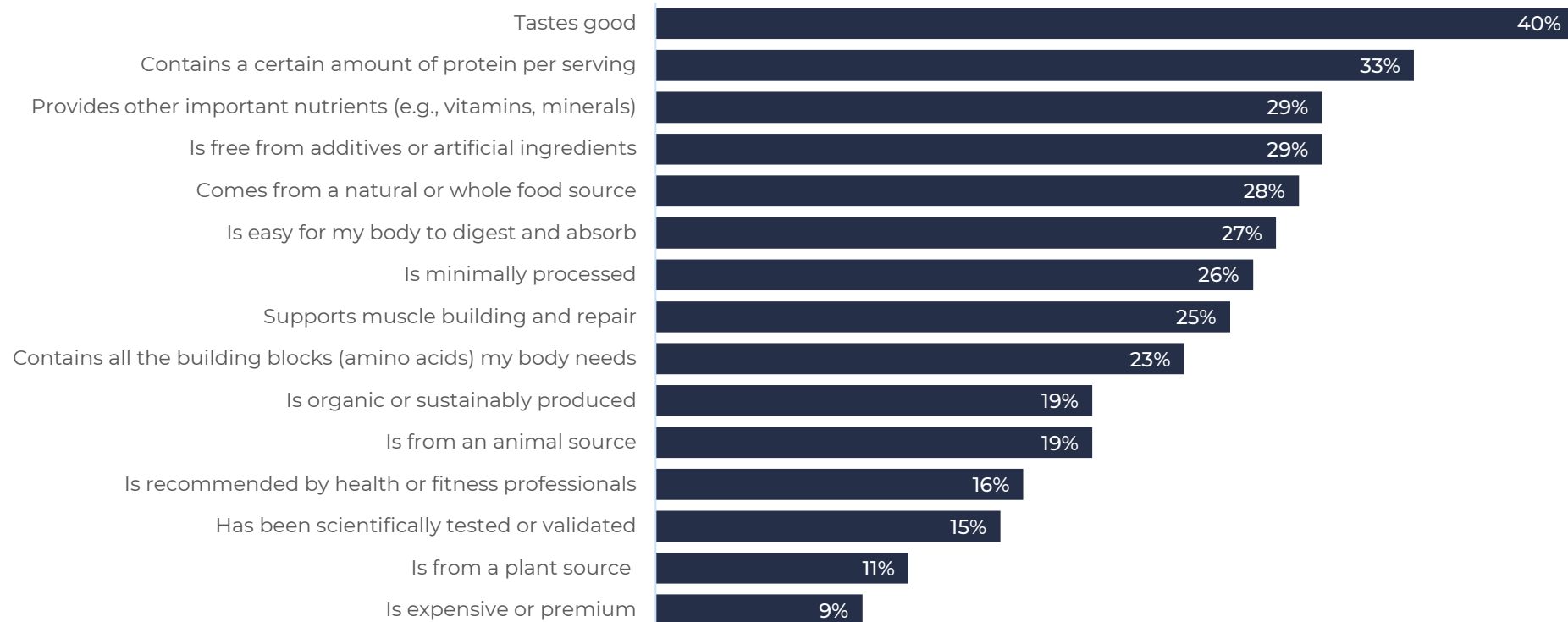


Q9. You mentioned that you check protein information on food packaging. What types of protein information would be most helpful for you to see on food packaging? Select all that apply. (n=364; FILTER: Looks for protein information on the back or side of food packaging)

Four in ten Americans associate “high-quality protein” with good taste.

“High-quality protein” is most often associated with good taste (40%) and/or containing a certain amount of protein per serving (33%). It is least often linked to a plant source (11%) and/or being expensive (9%). Nearly one in three also associate “high-quality protein” with attributes such as being free of additives or artificial ingredients (29%), coming from natural or whole food sources (28%), and/or being minimally processed (26%).

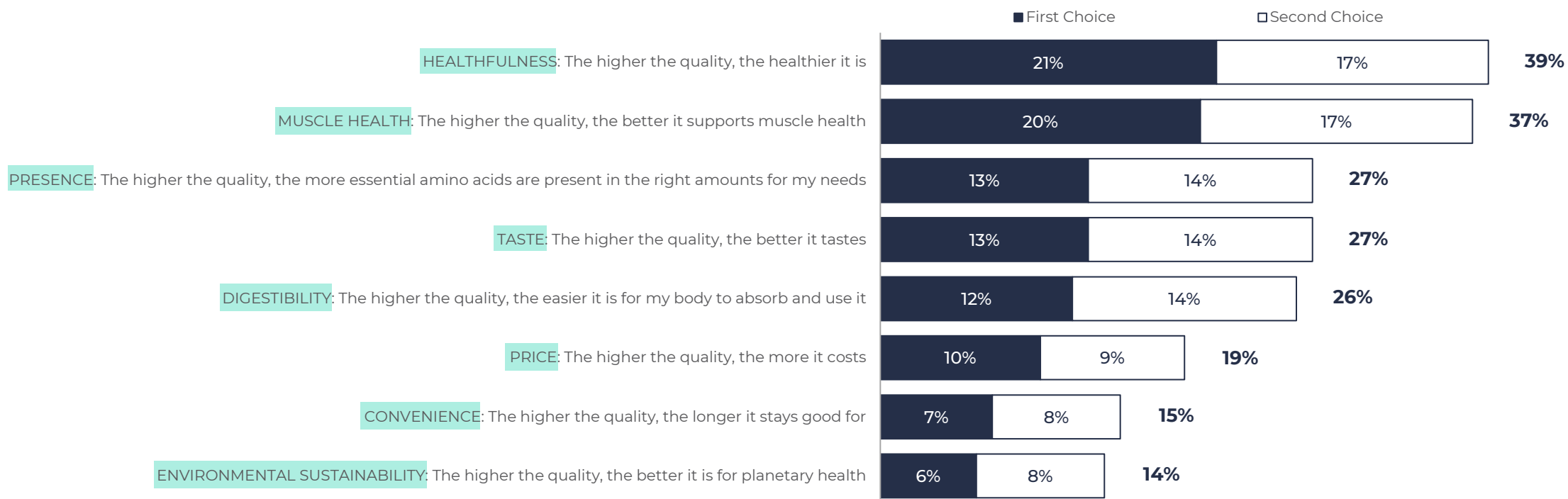
Perceptions Of “High-Quality Protein”



Most Americans believe the term “protein quality” refers to healthfulness and ability to support muscle health.

Nearly four in ten Americans believe “protein quality” refers to healthfulness (39%) and/or muscle health (37%), while fewer than two in ten associate it with price (19%), convenience (15%), and/or environmental sustainability (14%).

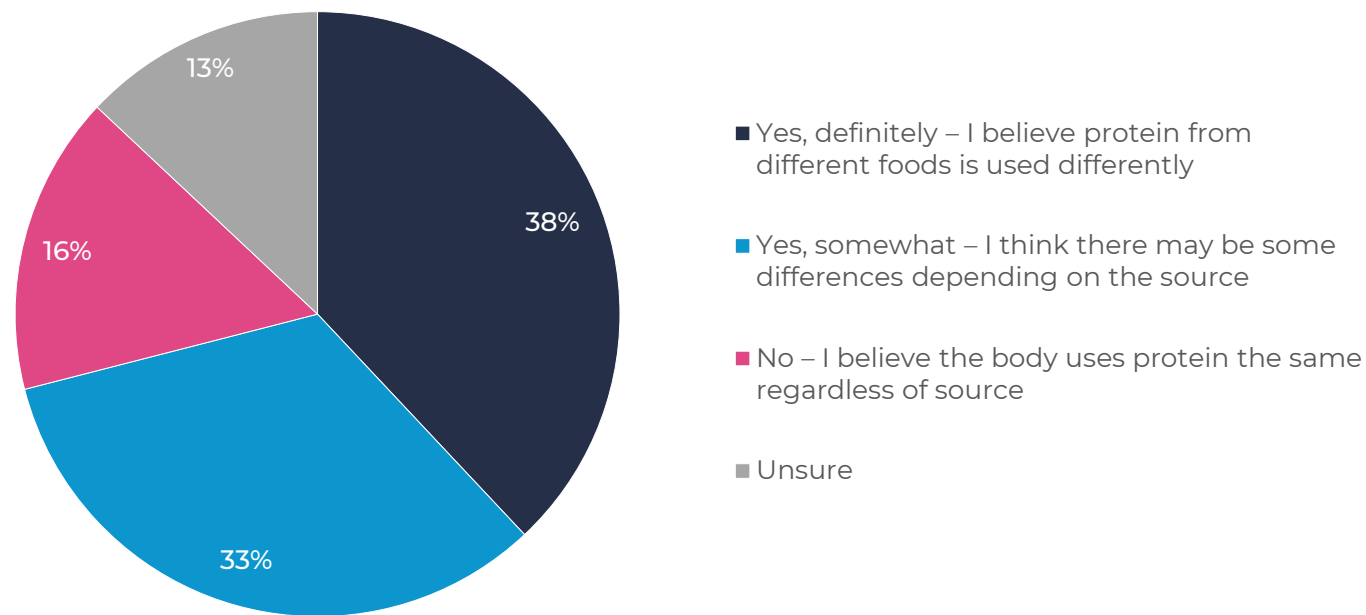
Perceptions Of “Protein Quality”



Most Americans believe the body uses protein differently depending on the food source.

Seven in ten (71%) believe the body uses protein differently depending on its source (38% definitely, 33% somewhat). Fewer than two in ten (16%) believe the body uses protein the same regardless of source, while 13% are unsure.

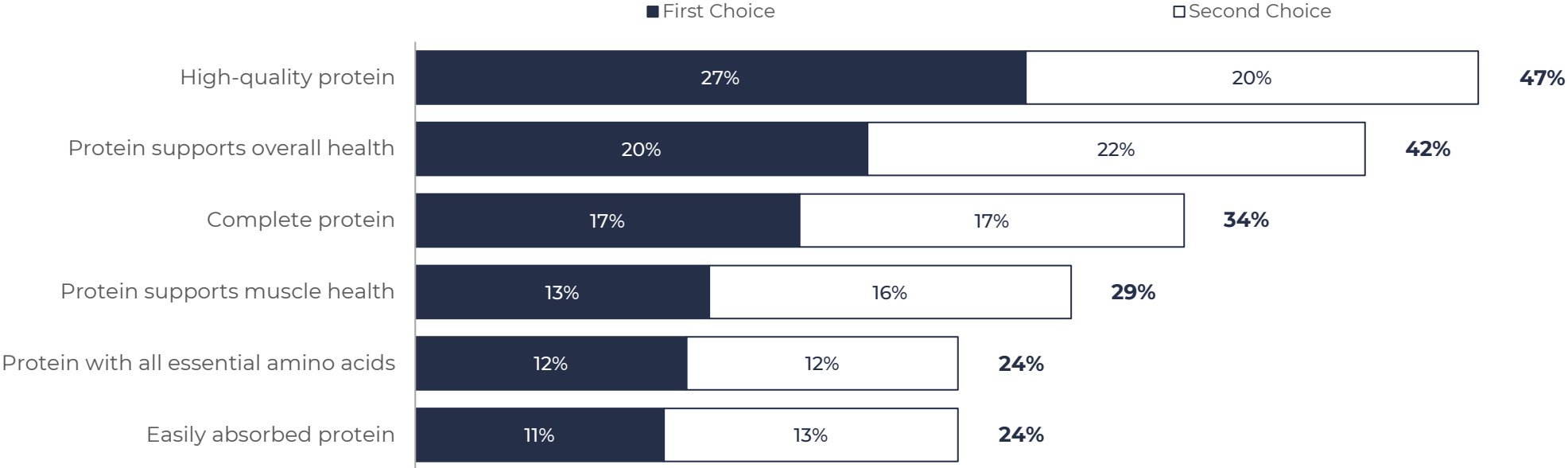
Beliefs About Whether The Body Uses Protein Differently By Source



“High-quality protein” and “protein supports overall health” resonate with Americans more than other protein-related claims.

More than one in four (27%) say “high-quality protein” would be the most meaningful protein-related phrase on food packaging. “Protein supports overall health” ranks next (42%), while fewer than one in four find statements about essential amino acid content or ease of protein absorption meaningful (24% each).

Protein Phrases Americans Find Meaningful For Food Packaging



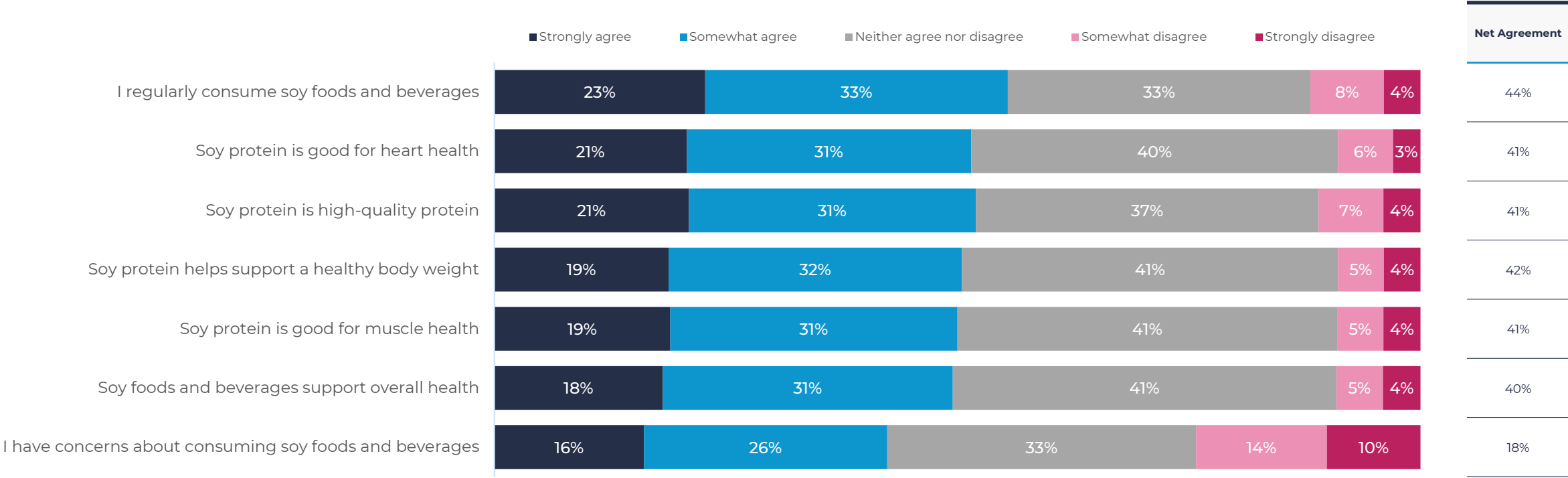
Q7. Which of the following phrases would be the most meaningful to you if you saw it on food packaging? Rank your top two, with 1 being the most meaningful. (n=1017)

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Americans report regularly consuming soy foods and beverages and recognize the health benefits of soy protein.

Net agreement is high for several health benefits of soy protein (+40% to +42%). Reported consumption of soy foods and beverages is even higher (+44%), while concerns remain comparatively low (+18%).

Agreement Level With Statements About Soy Foods & Beverages



Net Agreement = % Agree (Somewhat + Completely) minus % Disagree (Somewhat + Completely)



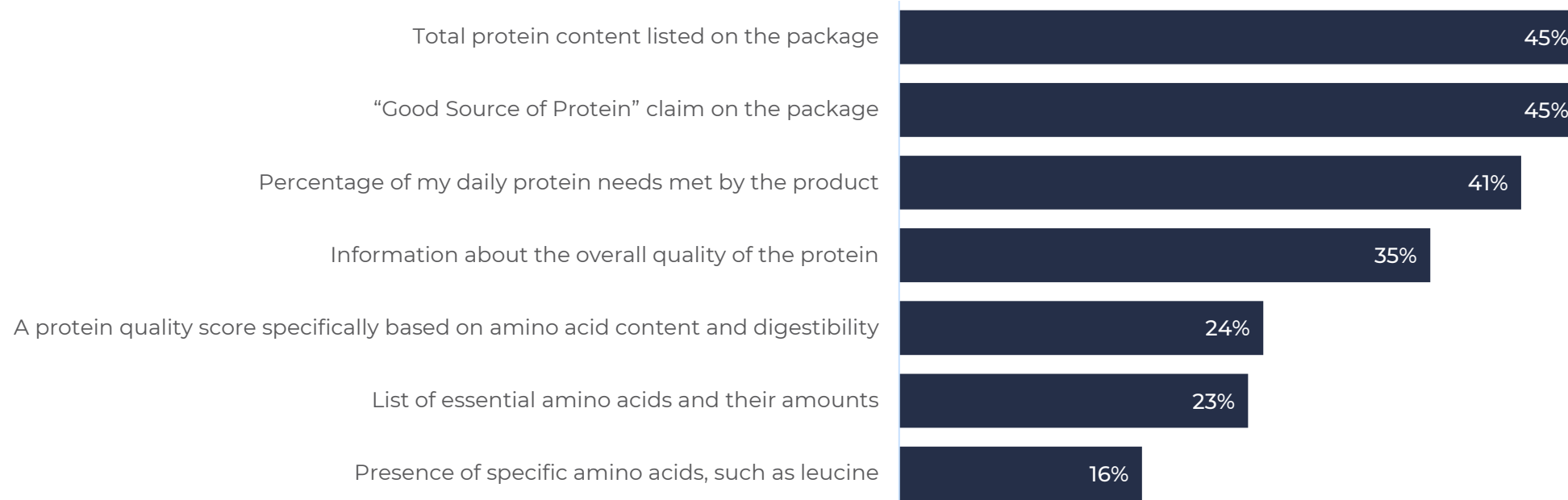
Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. (n=1017)

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Protein content claims and overall protein quality information resonate more with Americans than amino acid measures.

More than four in ten say total protein content (45%), a “good source of protein” claim (45%), percent of daily protein needs (41%), and/or overall protein quality information (35%) are meaningful when choosing protein foods. Fewer prioritize more technical information, such as a protein quality score (24%), amino acid content, and/or the presence of amino acids like leucine (16%).

Protein Information Americans Find Meaningful





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