

Top 10 Nutrition Trends of 2011

The Dairy Council of California has a Nutrition Trends Task Force which includes ten 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 over 50 publications that report on nutrition issues. This summary is the result of the meeting conducted in February 2011, to review the issues and determine the top nutrition trends.

1. Skyrocketing diabetes rates will impact the health of Americans and the health care system

The United States is now rated the fattest of 33 developed countries, with higher incidence of type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and other comorbidities. If this trend continues, it is expected that the incidence of diabetes will double or triple by 2050, affecting one out of every three Americans. Public health experts are understandably very concerned about the future health of Americans, as well as escalating healthcare costs.

Public-health campaigns to control overweight and minimize risk of these diseases will increase in the coming years, with a focus on prevention at younger ages. Attempts will be made to reach people in their communities at grocery and drug stores, churches, gyms and beauty shops—as well as in healthcare settings. Compulsory food labels highlighting calories and “negative” nutrients, meal-board labeling in restaurants and limiting advertising of unhealthy foods to children are also on the horizon as a more “healthogenic” environment is promoted. *Health professionals will need to balance well-intentioned efforts to reduce calories, sugar and sodium with the importance of nutrient intake, overall diet quality and acceptability.*

2. Early lifestyle habits are seen as critical to disease prevention

Research is accumulating that early diet and lifestyle habits are critical to future health. Obesity, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, osteoporosis and other chronic diseases are increasingly being linked to factors as early as in utero. Experts believe that environmental, diet and lifestyle factors during a mother’s pregnancy and during infancy can “program” an individual’s genetic expression. For example, nutrient deficiencies during pregnancy can permanently alter a baby’s ability to absorb and metabolize specific nutrients, which could lead to health problems later in life.

Habits formed in childhood are particularly strong determinants of future health. High blood pressure and cholesterol levels in childhood and adolescence predict future risk for heart disease. Childhood is seen as the time to learn and reinforce healthy behaviors, and the time when food choices can influence health outcomes for years to come. *As health professionals, we have significant opportunities to educate children and their caregivers to establish habits that will lead to long-term health and vitality.*

3. New government recommendations put spotlight on health and nutrition, yet seen as conservative by some nutrition experts

The release of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines and recent revision of the Institute of Medicine's (IOM) calcium and vitamin D recommendations turned out to be more conservative than expected by many experts. As a result, not all health professionals are supporting these reports, questioning whether recent research was adequately considered in the new recommendations. This could lead to various groups developing their own recommendations and could result in consumer confusion.

New areas of focus in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines are sodium reduction, body-weight management and healthy eating patterns such as the DASH Diet, which is high in low-fat dairy products, fruits and vegetables. In addition, the guidelines emphasize the need for all segments of society—the health professional, consumer, food industry and government—to work together to implement the recommendations.

The IOM recommendations changed only slightly for calcium, but doubled or tripled for vitamin D for almost all age groups. Consumers are encouraged to achieve the higher levels through careful selection of their food and beverage choices. *With these recent and highly visible federal guidelines come renewed opportunities for health professionals to help patients and clients improve their eating habits, focusing on dietary patterns and food sources of nutrients.*

4. New 'gatekeepers' will join ranks with the traditional health care provider

The dearth left by the anticipated 50,000-person reduction in medical doctors over the next decade will be filled by other healthcare providers, such as alternative/integrative medicine practitioners and other allied health professionals, like nurse practitioners and physician's assistants. At the same time, nutrition education may shift from registered dietitians to less-qualified certified nutritionists and others who call themselves "experts." This shift may be further supported by changes in healthcare laws, allowing for expanded insurance coverage for alternative providers and a focus on prevention.

This movement may present competition to health organizations that pride themselves on their research-based, application-ready programs and materials developed by highly trained staff. In addition, it may lead to confusion, as consumers will hear more conflicting messages about health and diet. *Trained health professionals may need to work that much harder to remain being seen as the credible expert in this changing arena.*

5. The definition of healthy foods is broadening

Consumers, faced with multiple and confusing messages around health and nutrition, have a heightened need to feel good about their food choices. In addition to nutrition and health, food decisions are driven by taste preferences, culture, customs, environment, family and friends, convenience, economics, emotions and stress. This results in a broadening definition of “healthy” that combines spontaneous choices with embedded behaviors and habits. *Health professionals can assist by focusing on foods to include in a diet, rather than those to exclude, specifically helping consumers maintain foods they enjoy and showing them how these fit into a healthy diet in a positive way.* Behavior-change models may need to be modified based on this broader view, and delivery channels (e.g., social media) will need to be explored to optimize outcomes in this increasingly interactive environment for health promotion and prevention.

6. Sustainability is increasingly a factor in consumer food decisions

The sustainability movement is picking up steam. It is reported that 43 percent of people purchase sustainable food/drink for environmental reasons. Vegetarian and flexitarian diets will gain a foothold, as well as eating locally produced foods. Efforts across the food industry are resulting in significant reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions through improved efficiencies in the supply and production chain.

An often-overlooked area of these discussions is food waste—e.g., how much food spoils or is thrown away in food preparation, from the table, as uneaten leftovers in the refrigerator or at restaurants. Efforts to minimize waste could help improve overall sustainability and is an area where consumers can make a meaningful contribution. Buying local, for example, is seen by consumers as a way they can help in sustainability efforts and reap the rewards of freshness, geographic convenience and supporting the local economy.

With this increased focus on sustainability, it will be important to remember our goal of balanced nutrition. Sustainability-index systems that incorporate nutrient density, economics and other factors—not just carbon footprint—will help people toward that end.

7. Social networking, mobile apps are changing the way we access and use information

Social media continues to change how we access information. Currently, it is estimated that 61 percent of adults and 73 percent of teens use social networks. Mobile applications are expected to change the way people shop and buy, allowing them to tailor their habits to their individual and family’s needs. Businesses use social media to build and maintain relationships, whether face-to-face or electronically. Transparency, accountability and personalized attention will be critical factors in building trust, especially in the social-media world, opening up opportunities for marketing and education. Pitfalls, however, could be compromised consumer privacy and miscommunication or misinterpretation of information. *Health professionals will have expanded opportunities to communicate via smartphones, blogs, Twitter and mobile apps, yet will need to exercise caution to not over-simplify messages to the degree that the bigger context is lost.*

8. The food industry is under increasing pressure to reformulate products

The food industry continues to reformulate food products to lower the amount of ‘bad’ ingredients in their products, meeting new recommendations and consumer demand for healthier products. Focus has been on reducing calories, sugar, sodium and fat—particularly saturated and trans fats—and adding whole grains. Since 2002, more than 20,000 “healthier” or “better for you” food products have been introduced by manufacturers trying to keep up with demand. These reformulation efforts will pick up steam with the new sodium recommendations, which were further reduced for “at risk” individuals in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines. Clients will have an ever-increasing array of products to choose from to help them reach their health goals.

9. Changing demographics sub-segment audiences and the approaches to reach them

There are some significant changes in demographics occurring that will greatly impact food choices and health trends over the next few years. For example, the increasing Mexican-American population in California will present challenges, as these individuals typically change their eating habits with acculturation. The aging baby-boomer population also presents challenges and opportunities. With age, health concerns become more acute and can impact one’s food choices. This group also can have significant influence over family members, particularly if they are caregivers to children and grandchildren. *Health professionals can create educational programs and messages for these specific groups to optimize behavior change that leads to healthy food choices.*

10. Protein is gaining positive research attention for its benefits

Research on the expanding array of health benefits of higher-protein diets shows that protein is not just for the body builder and athlete anymore. New research is now differentiating between types of protein, identifying benefits of distributing protein evenly throughout the day and discovering benefits beyond its effects on muscle—including bone health, weight management, blood glucose control, heart health and post-exercise rehydration and recovery. About one-half of Americans report that they are trying to consume a higher-protein diet, thinking it will help build muscle, induce satiety, help with weight loss and slow the aging process. Baby boomers in particular will seek out sources of dietary protein to mitigate sarcopenia, the age-related decline in muscle loss, physical strength and functioning. *The health professional will need to keep abreast of the advancing research on health benefits of protein and be equipped to offer advice to meet clients’ unique health needs and goals.*

