

# Top 10 Nutrition Trends for 2014

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## 1) Dietary intervention is key in preventing metabolic syndrome and diabetes.

The incidence of metabolic syndrome—the cluster of risk factors for heart disease that includes high blood pressure, abnormal lipid levels and insulin resistance—appears to be leveling off somewhat, perhaps due to better control of symptoms. With burgeoning incidence of overweight, however, metabolic syndrome and diabetes will continue to be top health concerns with focus on prevention as 35 percent of Americans are currently estimated to have pre-diabetes.

Dietary patterns are getting attention for their ability to prevent diabetes and metabolic syndrome. Diets high in fiber, fruits and vegetables and low in processed meat, sugar-sweetened beverages and refined grains may lower diabetes risk. Dietary patterns that include milk and dairy foods are also associated with lower risk, possibly due to their calcium, vitamin D, protein, dairy fat or specific fatty acids. Clinical trials have backed up the observational studies, showing the preventative effects of dairy, with as little as 1 to 2 servings a day sufficient to lower risk. *Health professionals are encouraged to advocate for healthy diet and lifestyle choices, including weight loss if needed, to minimize risk of developing metabolic syndrome and diabetes.*

## 2) Saturated fat may no longer be a primary villain in heart disease.

Saturated fat is getting the green light in some circles as new research continues to show that specific saturated fatty acids, including some in dairy foods, are either neutral or positive in heart health. This comes at a time when accumulating research also shows that *what* replaces saturated fat in the diet greatly affects health. For example, replacing saturated fat with carbohydrates, especially refined carbohydrates, may worsen the overall lipid profile; replacing saturated fat with polyunsaturated fatty acids may increase the risk of heart disease, cardiovascular events and overall mortality.

In spite of this accumulating evidence that not all saturated fat is bad, many health officials and organizations continue to adhere to existing recommendations that group all saturated fat together and set strict limits on intake levels. The research is being translated into consumer articles, however, making it necessary for health professionals to be prepared to clarify the disparity between public health advice and new evidence.

Dietary patterns are also being researched for their link to heart disease. Patterns consistently associated with lowering risk are the DASH Diet and Mediterranean dietary pattern, suggesting that whole food diets and lifestyles—not individual foods or nutrients—can reduce risk. *It is the charge of health professionals to individualize public health recommendations to specific clients, taking disease risk, dietary preferences and new research into account. The goal is to find feasible and practical solutions to help clients minimize risk of chronic disease such as heart disease.*

### 3) Protein provides multiple health benefits for all ages.

Consumers seek out protein for many reasons such as sports nutrition, weight management, muscle building and healthy aging. The demand for high-quality protein—from lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy foods—is predicted to rise as the list of health benefits grows and as refined carbohydrates are increasingly associated with poor health outcomes.

The protein market is growing at the retail level, with many new food products in the last year touting added protein or highlighting existing protein. Many protein-fortified beverages are being developed for both pre- and post-workout. Plant-based protein sources such as pea, rice, alfalfa, quinoa and chia are gaining in popularity. Milk protein is also a popular ingredient in protein-enriched foods.

Much of the protein research shows that intake levels higher than the RDA are necessary to maximize body composition and other health benefits. Spreading protein intake equally throughout the day is important for optimal results. For most Americans, this means that protein intake should be increased at breakfast and snacks. Breakfast opportunities include eggs, peanut butter, yogurt parfaits, breakfast smoothies and milk on cereal. *For clients who want to increase their protein intake, health professionals can help develop balanced diet plans that incorporate high-quality protein foods throughout the day.*

### 4) Consumer need for personalized diet and nutrition messages continues to grow.

Consumers are expecting—and demanding—personalization in many areas from shopping and dining to health and nutrition. Social media and technology support this quest for “just for me” messages, information and advice. Various applications that track dietary intake and weight management are available, as well as interactive programs that help consumers find pertinent information on their health and nutrition needs. As big data becomes commonplace as a way to capture the specific purchasing and eating habits of consumers, marketers are finding unique ways to meet consumers where they are, ultimately creating higher engagement and relationships with them. Similar opportunities abound for nutrition educators, registered dietitians and other health professionals as consumers seek individualized diet and lifestyle plans to achieve their goals.

Despite some privacy issues, consumers are generally more willing to provide personal information in order to receive benefits that resonate with them on an emotional level. *Health professionals are charged with helping their clients personalize food and lifestyle choices that still meet basic recommendations.*

### 5) Consumer food choices are increasingly complicated.

Consumer concerns about food have expanded well beyond price, seasonality and taste. Their food choices today often reflect concerns about the environment, animal care, GMOs, pesticides, specific diet claims, local production, organics and many other factors. Consensus science is often overlooked in food decisions as consumers make choices based on emotion and anecdotes rather than on the body of scientific studies showing nutritional or disease-fighting attributes.

Mistrust of the government and the food industry also plays a role as food choices are driven by credibility perceptions. Local farmers are preferred over large agribusinesses; sustainable production practices are scrutinized with a skeptical eye; fresh and natural foods are more acceptable than processed foods. *Health professionals can encourage clients to investigate manufacturing practices to help them feel good about their food-choice decisions and can encourage the food industry to be transparent in actions and communications to build consumer trust in the food supply.*



## 6) Probiotics—healthy bacteria—garner increasing attention as a key factor in gut health.

Research is showing the gut microbiome—the population of naturally-occurring bacteria in the intestinal tract—is key to health and many diseases. Gut health can be altered to some extent through diet, specifically by fiber, fruits, vegetables and the type and amount of probiotics that individuals consume. Certain probiotics are being studied for their ability to help with weight management and satiety, improve mood and cognitive function, minimize symptoms of lactose intolerance and reduce incidence of colds and some types of cancer. While this body of evidence is growing, it is unclear whether studies will be far enough along for the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Committee to include probiotics (in yogurt and other fermented foods) in its recommendations for a healthy diet.

Related research is looking at the level of probiotic consumption needed for certain health benefits, with some studies claiming that only small amounts of yogurt on a weekly basis are needed to lower blood pressure and manage weight. Other health effects may require higher levels, or a combination of specific strains, for optimal benefit. *Health professionals will need to stay abreast of the benefits of probiotics to provide the most current, relevant information to their clients.*

## 7) Obesity is still a primary health concern, with efforts focused on children.

Obesity incidence continues its climb upward, at just over 27 percent of U.S. adults for 2013. Specific subgroups such as preschool-aged children, however, are leveling off or declining, indicating some progress is being made.

Sugar is a major target in obesity-prevention efforts, with some advocating a tax on soft drinks and other foods and beverages with added sugar. Some municipalities are considering moving ahead with their own city-wide sugar tax before any nationwide policy is made. Proposed new food labels call out added sugar more clearly.

The obesity paradox—the belief that obese people can be metabolically healthy—is being challenged, with new data showing obese people are indeed at higher risk for chronic disease. This may result in a renewed push for obesity-prevention efforts, especially those aimed at children. Early lifestyle habits tend to track into adulthood, setting the stage for future health and disease status. Children are more likely to be obese if they get inadequate sleep, have obese parents and have a restricted diet—the latter often, ironically, leads to overeating. *Health professionals are encouraged to guide parents in helping their children establish healthy eating patterns that will last a lifetime.*

## 8) Consumer interest in natural, functional, fresh food grows.

Terms that resonate with consumers are natural, locally grown, fresh, healthy, organic and sustainable. Products labeled as reduced calorie, low HFCS (high fructose corn syrup), low sodium, no trans fats, gluten-free and GMO-free are also appealing to increasingly health-savvy consumers. The food industry is responding to this quest for healthy ingredients through transparency in its production practices, labeling even when not mandated and using ingredients that consumers will accept.

Certain foods within each food group are naturally well-positioned in this arena. Milk, cheese and yogurt; fresh fruits and vegetables; and whole-grain breads and cereals that are minimally processed, “like your grandma served,” are good fits to consumer demands for fresh and natural. For example, consumers are returning to butter, with sales up 40 percent in the United States as people look for alternatives to margarine and other spreads with industrial trans fats. *Health professionals can help clients understand that their desire for natural, whole and fresh foods is in fact a perfect match to the Dietary Guidelines’ total diet approach using all five food groups, and can remind clients to choose foods that are nutrient-dense within each group.*



## 9) Cognition and mental health are new areas of nutrition research.

From young to old, the quest for optimal brain function has never been stronger, with recent research looking at beneficial nutrients like omega-3 fatty acids and vitamins B and E. This is a fairly new field, with evidence that diet quality can play an important role in mental health. Preliminary research suggests that heart-healthy diets are associated with greater cognitive performance. Dietary patterns high in fruits, vegetables, protein and good fats and low in refined carbohydrates and processed foods appear most beneficial. Studies have also found that low-fat dairy foods, as part of a regular, balanced diet, may benefit the brain during aging and that individuals who drank milk daily in childhood had better cognition as adults than non-milk drinkers.

Slowing the physical and cognitive aging processes is a strong area of research that could aid in preventing disease, extending the span of healthy living and dramatically improving public health. *Health professionals have an opportunity to educate clients about long-term healthy dietary habits to promote mental as well as physical health.*

## 10) Sustainability efforts focus on waste management.

Sustainability concerns are focused on minimizing waste throughout the supply chain from production to retail and consumer levels. Some reports suggest as much as one-third of the world's food is wasted from production to consumption. The estimated 1.3 billion tons of food wasted each year could feed as many as 2 billion people—and with a skyrocketing world population this loss can no longer be ignored.

Food donation programs, recycling programs, composting and waste diversion to animal feed are some opportunities to prevent food waste from entering landfills. Supermarkets and restaurant chains are also pledging their help to minimize waste. The food industry is committed to conservation efforts such as optimizing production practices and managing waste products. Often it is at the consumer level where waste is large, 20 percent for some foods. *Health professionals can encourage greener production practices among industry colleagues and educate their clients to better manage waste through meal planning, efficient shopping, optimal storage and at-home food preparation.*

The Dairy Council of California has a Nutrition Trends Task Force which includes 12 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 a wide variety of publications, both scholarly journals and news media that report on nutrition issues. This summary outlines the top nutrition trends identified and discussed at the winter 2014 meeting.

