How Americans Define Health for Food and Beverages

Suzannah Gerber, Julia Reedy, Meghan O'Hearn, Sylara Marie Cruz, and Dariush Mozaffarian

Tufts University

Objectives: To assess how American adults consider and define healthfulness of food and beverages.

Methods: In Fall 2021, a national sample of 1,878 adults balanced by age (18–34 years, 35–49, 50–64, 65+), sex, race/ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Hispanic/Latinx, Non-Hispanic Black, Asian/other), and annual income, completed an online survey asking about demographics and priorities for food businesses and product purchases, including select-all and agreement rated items on definitions of healthfulness for food and beverages. Pearson's r and Jaccard Index were used to assess correlation (PCC) and choice similarity, respectively.

Results: Among 12 definitions of healthfulness, respondents most commonly chose *nutritionally balanced* (67%); *all natural* (56%); *supports health outcomes* (55%); and *full of vitamins and minerals* (52%); followed by *organic* (41%); *safe to eat* (41%); *specific nutrient profile* (38%); *locally grown/culturally relevant* (27%); *supports weight loss* (25%); *non-GMO* (23%); *aids athletic/physical performance* (16%); *popular diet* (13%). These perceptions varied by race/ethnicity and age. *Nutritionally balanced* was selected by 78% of Asian/other adults and 82% of 65 + y adults, vs. White (69%), Black (64%), or Hispanic/Latinx (61%) adults; or 50–65 y (75%), 35–49 y (59%), 18–34 y (57%). Findings were more similar by income. PCC was highest *for nutritionally balanced* and: *full of vitamins* (0.81); *supports health outcomes* (0.80); and *all natural* (0.76). Jaccard similarity was < 0.55 for all definition pairs except *organic* and *safe to eat* (0.99).

Conclusions: In a large, diverse national sample of US adults, consumers most defined healthfulness of food and beverages as *nutritionally balanced*, *all natural*, or *supports health outcomes*. *Organic*, *supports weight loss*, and *non-GMO* were much less reported as definitions of product healthfulness. No single definition was selected by >2/3 of US adults; and combined with low Jaccard values, suggests a lack of consensus on simple definitions of healthfulness. Concepts were prioritized differently by age and race/ethnicity, but much less by income. These novel findings have implications for health communications, education, and guidance aimed at reducing consumer confusion about healthier food and beverage choices.