

# UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIAL EATING BEHAVIOR

MARCIA GREENBLUM MS, RD  
SENIOR DIRECTOR, HEALTH AND WELLNESS

# WHY ADDRESS EATING BEHAVIOR IN THE FIRST PLACE?

## ❖ Rise of obesity:

- ❖ “The Millennial generation has poor health habits, including inactivity and poor nutrition, which contribute to the early development of overweight and obesity.” (J Bus Psychol (2010) 25:239–245)
- ❖ 2/3 of adults and almost 1/3 of children in the United States are overweight or obese.
- ❖ Annual cost of obesity related illness is \$190.2 billion.(IOM Obesity Report 2012)

## ❖ Information doesn't equate knowledge:

- ❖ The majority of Americans believe they **have a great deal of control** over the healthfulness of their level of their diet, physical activity and their weight, but few are actually taking that control. (IFICF 2013 Food and Health Survey)

 The challenge is **not what is healthy food** but understanding *how* to harness the influences and challenges that **predict and change behaviors.**

# WHY STUDY MILLENNIAL EATING BEHAVIOR?

1. *Is there documented evidence that Millennial health related eating behavior is a problem?*
  2. *Do Millennials have unique eating behavior challenges that are not being addressed?*
- **What** do we know about Millennial eating behavior?
  - **What** challenges do Millennials face that prevent them from eating healthfully?
  - **Where** are resources that help Millennials eat healthfully?
  - **Where** do Millennials get their nutrition information?
  - **When** do Millennials eat and when do they need help eating more healthfully?
  - **How** can messages empower Millennials to eat more healthfully?
  - **How** can childhood obesity be prevented by communicating healthful eating to future parents?



# MILLENNIALS REALIZE THEY COULD BE EATING MORE HEALTHFULLY

Healthful Eating



Actual Eating



Millennials acknowledge the importance of eating healthfully, but all admit they do not always eat as healthfully as they would like.

Healthful meal= lean meats, a starch, fruits, vegetables, or a salad.  
Actual meals=red meats or fried foods, few or no vegetables or produce.

# WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT MILLENNIAL EATING BEHAVIOR?

- A **2010 landmark report “Too Fat to Fight”** in which 100 retired generals and admirals who formed the nonprofit organization “Mission: Readiness” released their research findings revealing that **75 percent of the nation’s 17- to 24-year-olds do not qualify for military service, mostly due to obesity**, demonstrating a military imperative to reverse this unhealthy trend.
- **J Adolesc Health**. 2012 April; 50(4): 324–333, titled “*Interventions for Weight Gain Prevention During the Transition to Young Adulthood: A review of the literature*”. **Physicians routinely fail to document and/or address excess weight gain among young adults. An alarming nearly 5.5 million Americans are now obese by the time they reach their early 30s and the prevalence of obesity doubles as individuals progress from their 20s to their 30s.**
- **IFIC’s Food and Health Surveys** have shown that young adults rate themselves as less healthy and their diet to be less healthy than that of their elders, indicating a **need for more targeted messages**.
- The **2013 IFICF Food and Health Consumer Research** found young adults give significantly less thought about the healthfulness of their diet and are significantly more **concerned about the safety** and ingredients in their foods and beverages than their elders.
- **IFICF Americans’ Perceptions and Approaches to Eating and Drinking Occasions and Behavior Research** revealed some eating behaviors unique to the 18-35 year old consumer which can influence their health and energy balance such as their **lack of meal planning, incidence of breakfast skipping and susceptibility to emotional triggers that precipitate eating behavior**.

# UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIAL EATING HABITS

## Objective:

- A) To understand Millennials' current eating habits and their views toward nutrition and healthful eating in order to help them balance their food and drink consumption and activity.

## IFIC Foundation wished to learn:

- What influences Millennials' decisions about what to eat?
  - What are the barriers to more healthful eating patterns?
  - From what sources do they receive information about nutrition and balancing caloric intake with physical activity?
  - Who do Millennials trust for nutrition information?
- B) To test 6 messages for their effectiveness in motivating Millennials to achieve more healthful nutrition and activity levels consistent with the Dietary Guidelines.

# UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIAL EATING HABITS

- **Method:**

Six focus groups, two in Little Rock, AR on October 23, 2013 and four in Baltimore, MD on October 29 and 30. The groups lasted two hours. All participants were born between 1983 and 1993, and accessed the internet at least several times per week.

	Little Rock, Arkansas	Baltimore, Maryland
High Education	X	X
Low Education	X	X
Only Male (mixed ed.)		X
Only Female (mixed ed.)		X

▶ The research was conducted by Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc.

# KEY FINDINGS: CURRENT EATING HABITS

## Millennials' Current Eating Habits

Millennials acknowledge the importance of eating healthfully, but all admit they do not always eat as healthfully as they would like.

- ❖ The average grade Millennials give the healthfulness of their eating pattern is a C+.
  - ❖ Consider a healthful meal as lean meats and a starch along with fruits, vegetables, or a salad
  - ❖ Millennials actual meals consist of too much red meats or fried foods, with few or no vegetables or produce.

## Challenges to Eating More Healthfully

- ❖ Knowledge gaps include:
  - ❖ appropriate serving size
  - ❖ how many calories per day is appropriate for them
- ❖ Behavioral Challenges:
  - Lack of time, and a need to eat things “on the go.”
  - Lack of money
- ❖ Millennials are social



# KEY FINDINGS: INFORMATION SOURCES

---

## Information Sources

**Millennials obtain information on nutrition from internet searches and internet-based news sources.**

- ❖ Social media
- ❖ Mobile apps
- ❖ TV talk shows
- ❖ Popular magazines
- ❖ Food-related documentaries
- ❖ Few say health professionals have provided them nutrition information.

While few actually receive nutrition information from health professionals or independent universities with specific knowledge of the area, these would also be trusted sources for nutrition information.

# KEY FINDINGS: INFORMATION SOURCES

---

**Millennials are highly skeptical of nutrition information from any source.**

- Suspect information itself, or the way it is portrayed, is influenced by corporate interests. More believable if a neutral third party has produced and/or confirmed the information.
- Many Millennials fear that special interest groups have too great an influence on the research they hear.
- Millennials will believe nutrition information when it makes sense to them and whether it can be found from multiple sources.
- Visual Messages: Someone they know—especially if a successful friend or family member is the most believable source.

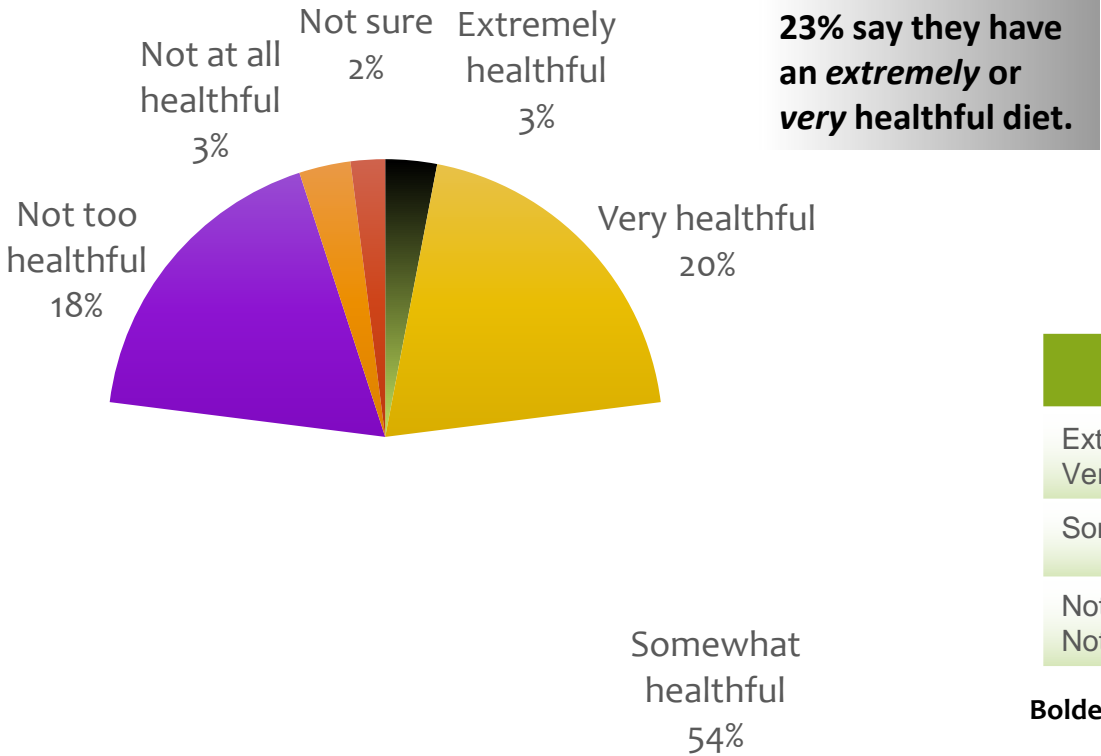
**DESPITE THE COMMON BELIEF THAT THEY ARE IN GOOD HEALTH, MANY AMERICANS FEEL THERE IS ROOM TO IMPROVE THEIR DIET.**

- Only about one in four consider their diet to be *very* or *extremely* healthful. This proportion rises with age.

- *How would you rate the healthfulness of your overall diet?*

By “diet,” we mean everything you eat or drink, including foods; beverages; and vitamins, minerals, and other dietary supplements.

All (n=1,057)



**Healthfulness of Diet By Age**

	18-34	35-49	50-64	65-80
Extremely/Very	19%	20%	24%	<b>35%</b>
Somewhat	51%	53%	58%	55%
Not too/Not at all	<b>27%</b>	24%	18%	10%

**Bolded** figures are significantly higher than one or more counterpart groups.

# KEY FINDINGS: MESSAGE TESTING

---

- 6 messages intended to motivate Millennials to eat more healthfully.
- Rate each message on:
  - clarity,
  - application to their life
  - motivation
- **Factors perceived as motivational for Millennials:**
  - Being positive, upbeat, and encouraging
  - Suggesting a goal that they believe is attainable
  - Being short and to-the-point
  - Reflecting information they already know or something they are already doing in their lives.
- Among the six messages tested, two stand out as motivational because they incorporate a number of these qualities—
  - **“Fun stuff counts” and the “Take charge of your weight”**

# KEY FINDINGS: MESSAGE TESTING

---

## Message Testing:

### **“Fun stuff counts”**

### **“Take charge of your weight”**

- The message makes some actively think about how they could change their own eating habits
- Makes one want to learn how to estimate the calories in certain foods and how much energy they burn in their own activities.
- The main critique of this message is that it ignores how important the healthfulness of foods can be to health and weight control.

None of the other four messages tested were considered motivating to more than about a third of Millennials.



*There's always an angle. There's always somebody trying to sell something. Nothing is ever purely unbiased.—Male, High Education, Little Rock*



*I live by myself. I don't cook for other people, I cook for myself, and they don't exactly make cookbooks for one. I work seven days a week. Finding the time and the energy to even cook, let alone cook enough so that I have leftovers, a lot of times I find it [hard].—Female, Mixed Education, Baltimore*



**IFIC**  
International  
Food  
Information  
Council



INTERNATIONAL  
**FOOD INFORMATION**  
COUNCIL FOUNDATION

*I guess I would trust it, it's a government source, but it just sounds really boring to me, and I just wouldn't be interested in hearing what they had to say...I would rather stick to other things like something that is really going to catch my attention more.—Female, High Education, Baltimore*



Marcia Greenblum MS, RDN  
Senior Director, Health and Wellness  
International Food Information Council  
[Greenblum@ific.org](mailto:Greenblum@ific.org)

[Foodinsight.org](http://Foodinsight.org)