

Americans Have Inaccurate Perception of Nutrient Intake

Source: Institute of Food Technologists

Nearly eight in 10 Americans (79%) say they are at least somewhat knowledgeable about nutrition, but new research from the International Food Information Council (IFIC) shows several wide gaps between their perception of the adequacy of their diets and reality. The 2013 International Food Information Council Functional Foods Consumer Survey reveals that despite consumers' reported knowledge about nutrition, the majority (67%) believe they fall short of meeting "all or nearly all" of their nutrient needs. "Functional foods" are defined as foods that have benefits beyond basic nutrition—such as blueberries, yogurt, and fortified milk, bread, or cereal.

The survey also shows significant disconnects between people's beliefs about whether they are getting sufficient amounts of many specific nutrients and the reality of their diets, as judged by the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) recommended by experts. A comparison between the survey's findings about perceptions of diet adequacy (by specific nutrient) and National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data shows wide chasms between how many believe their intakes are adequate versus the actual DRIs. For nutrients such as vitamin D (68% perception vs. 32% consumption), potassium (61% vs. less than 3%), and fiber (67% vs. 5%), the discrepancy between perception and reality is quite stark. The high percentage of consumers who are meeting their needs for B vitamins (60% perception vs. 90% consumption) is a testament to the value of functional foods, especially fortified foods, as providing a "functional fix."

It's clear that Americans have an interest in functional foods. Similar to survey findings from 2009 and 2011, 90% of consumers in 2013 agree that certain foods have health benefits beyond basic nutrition (87% in 2011, and 89% in 2009).

"While there is some disparity between perceived nutrient adequacy and actual nutrient intake, it is notable that consumers recognize the benefits their food can offer," said Sarah Romotsky, Associate Director of Health and Wellness at the International Food Information Council Foundation. "Indeed, health-promoting foods and food components play an important role in meeting nutrient needs and improving overall health."

Consumer interest in learning more about functional foods remains high. Almost nine in 10 Americans (86%) are interested in learning more about foods that have health benefits beyond basic nutrition. Similar to 2011, almost half of all consumers (45%) are "very interested."

This year's study further explored perceived barriers to functional foods. Respondents were offered a list of 16 potential reasons for not consuming more of these foods; on average, they selected 10 of those barriers, indicating that they perceive a variety of challenges. Specifically, price is the most common barrier, with more than half identifying it as a major reason. Other perceived barriers include skepticism of manufacturers' motives for adding health components to products, preference for the purity of basic foods, and taste.