TRENDS

DAIRY COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA
EST. 1919

FOOD AND NUTRITION TRENDS FOR EDUCATION AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS | 2026

Protein Demand Fuels Food & Dairy Innovation

Ultra-Processed Foods Shaping Health Guidance

Children's Health Crisis Prompts Action

NUTRITION INTEGRATED INTO HEALTHCARE

Dairy Council of California is a trusted nutrition organization committed to elevating the health of children and communities. Through education, advocacy and multisector collaboration, the organization promotes lifelong healthy eating patterns and advances the role of milk and dairy foods in improving nutrition security and supporting sustainable food systems. With more than a century of experience, Dairy Council of CA continues to lead with evidence-based nutrition science, education and strategic partnerships to build healthier communities.

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EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY

DAIRY AGRICULTURAL LITERACY AND PARTNERSHIPS

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FOREWORD

Building a Stronger Food and Nutrition Future: Current Challenges and Opportunities

The United States has long maintained a strong food and nutrition infrastructure, but multiple factors have put a strain on those systems, impacting millions of families, farmers and retailers. Cuts to food assistance and nutrition education programs, a shrinking agricultural workforce and global trade tensions have disrupted the food and nutrition system, contributing to economic uncertainty.

The 43-day federal government shutdown that started on October 1, 2025, interrupted federal nutrition programs, which taxed the charitable food system, especially food banks, and created instability for households vulnerable to food insecurity. Recent policy shifts have further destabilized the food and nutrition safety net. For example, stricter Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility requirements expanded the age range for work mandates and capped food benefit increases, thus restricting access to crucial resources.[1]

Concurrently, the elimination of federal funding for SNAP-Ed, the nation's most comprehensive nutrition education program with regard to reach and scope, removes critical education and support for skills like shopping on a budget, gardening, cooking, meal planning and creating healthier school and community environments.[2]

CalFresh Healthy Living, which is California's SNAP-Ed program, reached 1.8 million adults, adolescents and children through its programs just in 2024, highlighting the potential impact of this funding loss.[3] Furthermore, the cancellation of the Economic Research Service Household Food Security reports, key tools for tracking hunger in the U.S., combined with the rollback of programs connecting schools and food banks to local foods, add to these infrastructure challenges.[4,5]

Opportunities for Action

In contrast to these policy setbacks, the *Make Our Children Healthy Again Strategy Report* outlines a call to action to end childhood chronic diseases.[6] The report has four pillars: advancing research, realigning incentives, fostering private sector collaboration and increasing public awareness. Each offers recommendations to strengthen nutrition education, safeguard equitable food access and improve health across the life span.

For the first time, as of January 2026, 18 states will pilot restrictions on SNAP purchases primarily focused on sugar-sweetened beverages and candy, intending to influence consumer behavior and improve food choices. However, these restrictions raise critical questions about the importance of participant autonomy and if limitations alone correlate to improved nutrition outcomes.[7,8] These approved SNAP Food Restriction Waivers may lead to promising and nuanced results and could inform future policies.

Now is a pivotal opportunity for health professionals and educators to champion evidence-based policies and drive systemic change that meets the needs of all communities. The *2026 Trends* publication explores emerging food and nutrition trends, analyzes their implications and presents actionable strategies to empower professionals to shape the future of nutrition.

THE 2026 TRENDS FOR EDUCATION AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS PUBLICATION EXPLORES EMERGING FOOD AND NUTRITION TRENDS, ANALYZES THEIR IMPLICATIONS AND PRESENTS ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES TO DRIVE MEANINGFUL CHANGE.

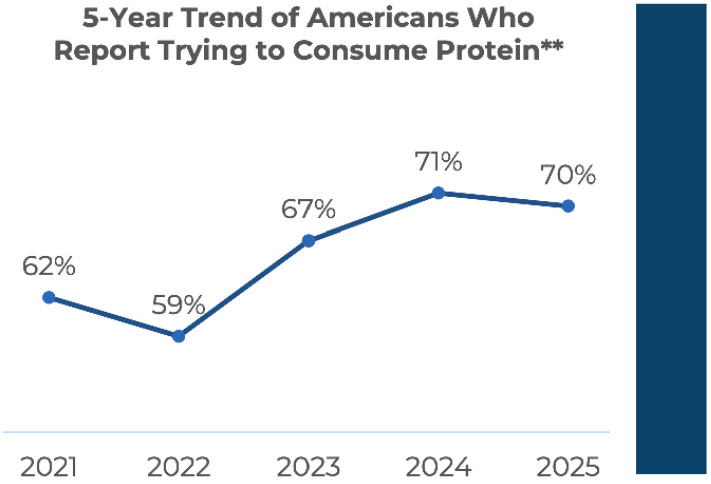
TREND 1

Rising Protein Demand Drives Food Industry Innovation, With a Spotlight on Dairy

Consumer demand for protein remains high, driven by goals such as improved strength/muscle health, healthy aging and overall well-being. According to the International Food Information Council's 2025 Food and Health Survey, 70% of Americans are actively seeking out protein foods, and a high-protein diet was the most common diet in the past year.[9] Despite this increased interest in protein, most people surveyed did not actually know how much protein they should consume daily, with more than half saying it should be 50 grams or less.

The rise in GLP-1 weight loss medications is also fueling protein interest. These medications, now used by roughly 12% of Americans (26.5% in adults with diagnosed type 2 diabetes), suppress appetite.[10] Thus it is essential for users to prioritize hydration, fiber-rich foods and protein to maintain adequate nutrient intake and prevent muscle loss, which is a serious concern linked to these medications.[11]

Although the importance of nutrition has been recognized with the use of GLP-1 medications, there is a lack of evidence in the literature about specific dietary recommendations.



Source: International Food Information Council

Based on consumer polls, interest in protein spans across age groups, and consumers are seeking protein for both meals and snacks. Parents of children and teens report looking for protein-rich snacks and are willing to pay more for products labeled "good source of protein."[12,13] Among teens, protein supplements like bars, shakes and powders are popular tools to support sports performance and muscle building.[14]

Widespread demand for protein is leading brands across the food and beverage industries to respond with new products and formulations.[15,16] Protein can be found in everything from pastas, breads, chocolate bars and snack foods to pre-made comfort foods such as rice-based dishes and soups.[17] According to market research, the high-protein product market is expected to grow by $50.2 billion from 2023 to 2028, partly fueled by incorporating whey protein into various foods and beverages, as well as using alternatives such as collagen, soy and pea proteins.[18]

Handhelds & Protein-Packed Snacks

As people look for grab-and-go snacks, demand has increased for protein-rich options. Snacks like yogurt, protein bars and shakes offer easy ways to meet protein needs between meals.

Consumers choose bars and shakes as a healthy, convenient and fast way to satisfy their hunger and obtain protein between meals.[7]

Young consumers are more likely to snack away from home.[8]

People who snack away from home more than once a day:[8]

40% of Generation Z
36% of Millennials
30% of Generation X
16% of Boomers

Source: Cargill

Dairy's Role in Shaping High-Protein Innovation

With rising demand for protein transforming the food industry, dairy is positioned as a leading sector. To support this growth, the U.S. dairy industry is increasing its processing capacity, particularly for milk powders and whey protein powder.[19] New dairy products fortified with functional ingredients are being tailored to specific health needs, including a dairy-based drink designed to support people taking GLP-1 weight loss medications, as well as supplement shots made of kefir and colostrum, which are ingredients known for their functional health benefits.[20,21]

Dairy proteins rank among the highest in terms of protein quality and digestibility, making them a great source for growing and repairing muscle tissues.[22] Beyond high-quality protein, dairy foods offer 12 essential nutrients, including potassium and vitamin B12, within a unique structure that provides functional health benefits beyond individual nutrients.[23] Dairy protein across traditional products such as milk, cheese and yogurt and innovative dairy solutions designed to optimize protein content reflect a commitment to meeting consumers' diverse needs, preferences and values.

Implications for Education and Health Professionals

- Nutrition education that aligns with evidence-based nutrition guidance can improve people's understanding of the amount of protein they need to eat and how to incorporate high-quality protein sources like dairy.
- GLP-1 medication use appears to be increasing, and a high-protein diet may help preserve muscle mass and satiety during associated weight loss or reduced appetite.
- It is important for health professionals and educators to guide consumers through the landscape of new and diverse protein food products to help identify options that best meet their nutrition needs, health goals, cultural preferences and budget constraints.
- Kid-friendly snack options like drinkable yogurts and protein snack packs can support children's nutrient needs and meet parents' desire for high-protein snack options.

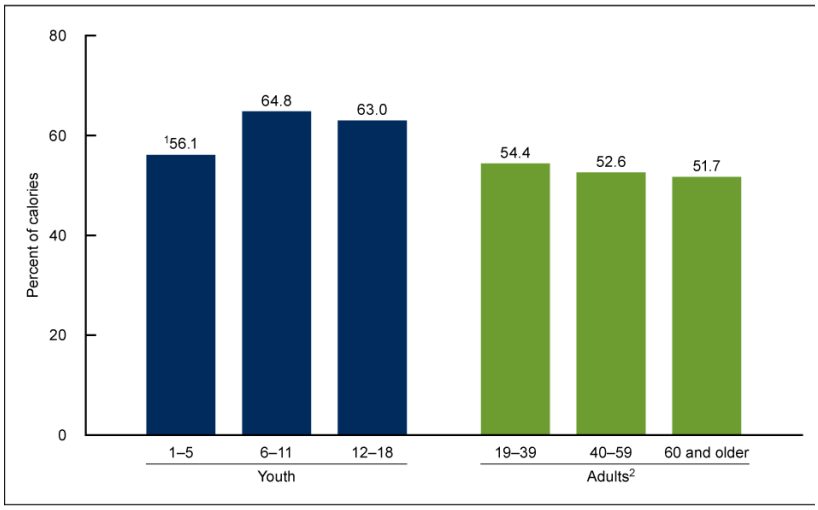
TREND 2

Ultra-Processed Foods Are Shaping the Future of Health Guidance

Ultra-processed foods are a key focus of global nutrition research and policy and have become central to consumer concern, government action and industry response, even as a definition is debated. The most common definition used for understanding ultra-processed foods is based on the NOVA food classification system developed by researchers at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, which categorizes foods based on processing level. The NOVA system is acknowledged for its oversimplification, as it doesn't account for nutritional composition or the food matrix, or the fact that certain processing methods can have neutral or even positive effects on health outcomes.[24] For example, milk can undergo processing techniques such as fermentation, but eating yogurt is linked with a range of health benefits, including a reduced risk for type 2 diabetes and less weight gain over time.[25]

Despite limitations in classifications and evolving terminology, data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey shows that over half of daily calories in the United States come from ultra-processed foods, with youth consuming more than adults and those in lower income groups consuming more than those with higher income.[26] Dietary factors, particularly from ultra-processed foods, have been identified as more significant contributors in the obesity epidemic, as compared to a lack of physical activity.[27] High consumption of ultra-processed foods has also been linked to disrupted neurocognitive development during childhood, impaired decision-making during adolescence and increased risk of mental health conditions in adulthood.[28]

Figure 2. Mean percentage of total calories from ultra-processed foods consumed by youth and adults, by age: United States, August 2021–August 2023



[1]Significantly different from age groups 6–11 and 12–18 years.
[2]Significant linear decrease across adult age groups.
NOTE: Ultra-processed food is based on the Nova classification.
SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, August 2021–August 2023.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics

Policy and Ultra-Processed Foods Definition Momentum

Consumer confidence in the U.S. food supply is declining across all age demographics, coupled with increased concern about chemicals and additives in food.[29] These concerns, alongside a growing health crisis, have contributed to the rapid emergence of movements to define and regulate ultra-processed foods at the international, federal and state levels. On the international stage, the World Health Organization is developing guidelines on the consumption of ultra-processed foods.[30] At the same time, the U.S. government is working to create a federal definition of ultra-processed foods to allow for consistency in research and policy.[31] The 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans is another key area to watch because how ultra-processed foods are addressed in the newest guidelines could impact federal nutrition programs.

At the state level, over 25 states have proposed actions related to food additives, signaling a growing trend of localized regulation and reflecting how concerns about ingredients are increasingly shaping conversations about ultra-processed foods.[32] California is regarded as a leader in food policy and access.[33] On Oct. 8, 2025, California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed AB 1264 into law.[34] Building on previous legislation that banned specific dyes and chemicals, AB 1264 is a bi-partisan effort to phase out particularly harmful ultra-processed foods from California school meals by 2035.

To align with potential legislation, many food companies are already voluntarily reducing additives and dyes. The International Dairy Foods Association committed to eliminating certified artificial food dyes from dairy products sold in national school meal programs by July 2026,[35] and partnered with U.S. ice cream members to pledge to remove these dyes from U.S. ice cream and frozen dairy desserts by 2028.[36] Additionally, major food companies are reformulating products like cereal, chips and other snack foods to eliminate petroleum-based synthetic dyes and other artificial ingredients.[37]

Implications for Education and Health Professionals

- Not all processed foods are created equal, and some are shown to be beneficial to health. Defining and regulating ultra-processed foods requires a nuanced approach that balances scientific rigor with practical guidance to help consumers and professionals navigate the complex food landscape.
- Promoting healthy eating patterns that include whole and minimally processed foods, in addition to tailoring nutrition education to individual health needs, budgets, lifestyles and cultures, can frame the conversation around ultra-processed foods in a positive way without villainizing certain foods.
- The evolving definition of ultra-processed foods could significantly impact nutrition security, especially in nutrition assistance programs, by influencing food availability, reformulation and vendor participation. Public health strategies should prioritize diet quality and promote the inclusion of affordable, nutrient-dense foods in eating patterns.
- Policies that support and incentivize healthy eating and funding for evidence-based nutrition education can empower individuals and families to make informed decisions that support long-term well-being.

TREND 3

Children's Health Crisis Spurs National Action

Children's health is facing a growing crisis. In the United States, key indicators of children's health have worsened, and racial disparities persist. Over the past 15 years, children's health has declined across many areas, with rising rates of mortality, chronic conditions, sleep problems, early puberty, and physical and emotional symptoms.[38]

Currently, an estimated one in three teens has prediabetes.[39] Excess body fat is a risk factor for type 2 diabetes, and rates of extremely severe obesity among U.S. children rose between 2008 and 2023, with the sharpest increases seen among older adolescents and Black children.[40] Pandemic-related increases in obesity prevalence were observed for Black children and adolescents, but not for other racial and ethnic groups.[41] According to a 2025 report from the United Nations Children's Fund, obesity among school-age children and adolescents exceeded underweight globally for the first time in history.[42]

Addressing children's health includes updated screening recommendations and medications. The American Academy of Pediatrics is recommending regular mental health screenings beginning at six months of age.[43] Meanwhile, GLP-1 medications are being explored for use in children and adolescents as obesity rates rise. A 2019–2024 retrospective study found GLP-1 use increased from 12.3% to 60.9% within a sample of 696 pediatric patients with type 2 diabetes.[44] However, overall GLP-1 medication use remains low among children and young adults.[45,46]

To address the escalating urgency behind the children's health crisis, the U.S. government and agencies are focusing on making national food programs healthier. The *Make Our Children Healthy Again Strategy Report* set forth recommendations intended to guide future efforts to improve child nutrition and well-being through stronger food policies, reduced ultra-processed foods and healthier food environments at school and home.[6] One recommendation is to identify ways to strengthen the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), a nutrition education program for people experiencing nutrition insecurity.

Collaboration to Improve Children's Health

Creative strategies and public-private partnerships are important to effectively address the health crisis. Several initiatives are expanding nutrition education and support in schools. For example, California's Farm to School Incubator Grant Program has awarded $86.8 million since 2021, connecting students across the state with locally sourced foods, as well as expanding school gardens and increasing food and agricultural education.[47] The California Foundation for Ag in the Classroom's Literacy for Life Grants also provide California K-12 educators with funding to integrate agriculture into classrooms through projects like gardens, farm days and field trips.[48]

Beyond grants, the private sector is also engaged in programming. The California School-Based Health Alliance launched The Power of Peers, a curriculum designed to train students to provide peer-to-peer support in school-based health centers, wellness centers and schools, thus equipping staff with tools to cultivate impactful peer support initiatives.[49] Danone North America is partnering with FoodCorps to build on a 2023 pilot that reached over 500,000 students with hands-on nutrition programs like cooking lessons, taste tests and school gardens.[50] By honoring cultural food traditions and engaging youth as leaders, these models build trust, agency and community connection.

Implications for Education and Health Professionals

- As the regulatory food environment evolves, nutrition education remains essential to addressing rising rates of chronic diseases. Hands-on learning such as gardening, cooking and farm-to-fork activities continue to be effective strategies.

- Declining health among children signals an urgent need for solutions addressing physical health, mental health and nutrition integrated across schools and health care systems. Proven strategies offer models that could be expanded or adapted within health care settings; for instance, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program successfully combines nutrition education, food access and health care referrals. Achieving long-term success requires innovative strategies and strong public-private partnerships to achieve lasting impacts on child health across generations.

- Policies aimed at improving children's health and nutrition are only as effective as the funding that supports them. Education and health programs need dedicated resources to implement, sustain and scale interventions, thus ensuring that classroom, community and clinical initiatives can translate policy goals into meaningful outcomes for children and families.

"HANDS-ON LEARNING SUCH AS GARDENING, COOKING AND FARM-TO-FORK ACTIVITIES CONTINUE TO BE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES."

Oral Health is Overall Health

Oral health can often be overlooked, but poor dental health increases the risk and severity of chronic diseases, including diabetes and heart disease. Nutrition plays a vital role in maintaining oral health and preventing dental caries in children and adults. Nutrients such as calcium, vitamin D, phosphorus, protein and vitamins A and C support enamel formation, gum health and remineralization. Maintaining good dental health is an essential part of preventing and managing chronic diseases across the life span.[51]

TREND 4

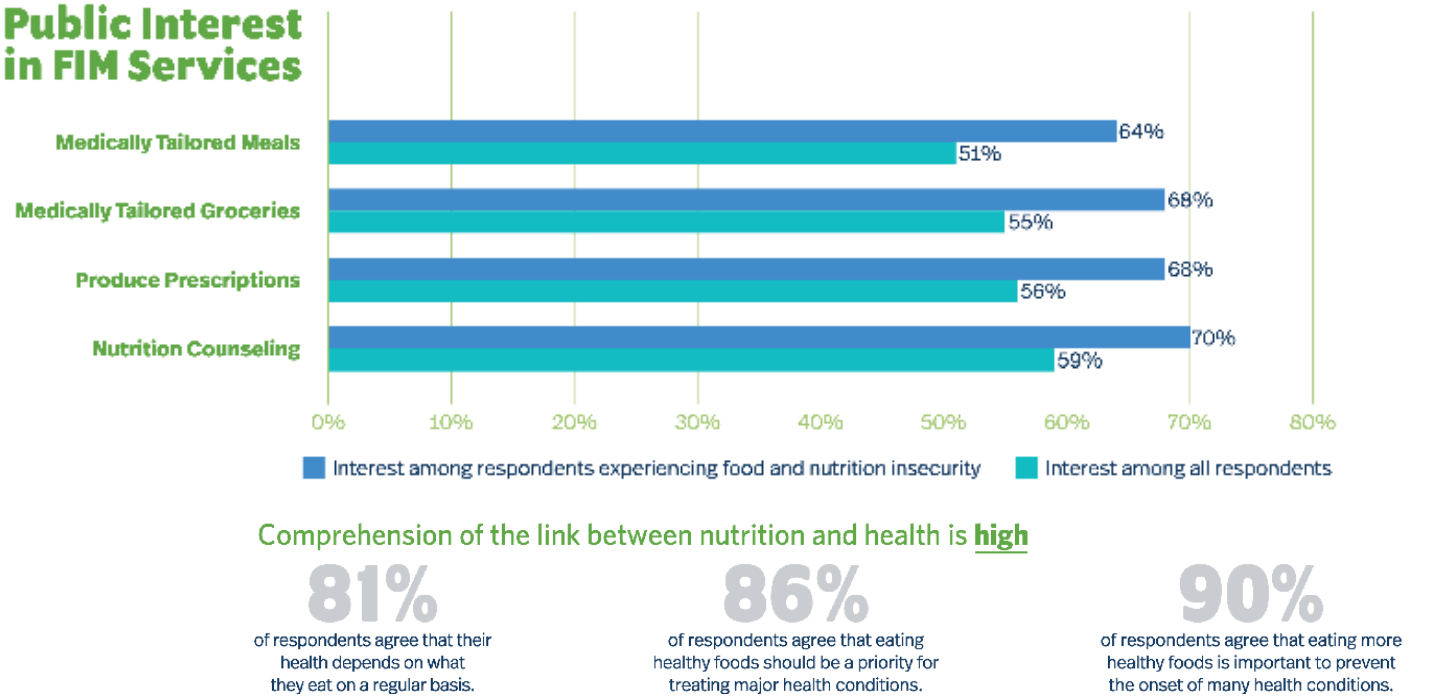
Food and Health Initiatives Expand as Nutrition is Integrated into Health Care

Nutrition interventions are emerging as a critical component of health care across the life span. Food Is Medicine approaches focus on integrating food and nutrition interventions into clinical care to prevent, manage and treat chronic diseases. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services established the Food Is Medicine initiative as a strategy to reduce chronic diseases and food insecurity.[52] Key public-private partnerships support the initiative, including The Rockefeller Foundation, Food & Society at the Aspen Institute, Instacart and Feeding America.[53]

Food is Medicine @TUFTS UNIVERSITY

Source: Tufts University

A systematic review of Food Is Medicine approaches found that produce prescriptions, food boxes and medically tailored meals positively influenced diet quality and food security.[54] Many of the programs in the review included nutrition education from a nutrition professional; however, larger, higher quality randomized controlled trials with clear clinical outcomes are needed to better establish the effectiveness of these interventions.



Source: Tufts University

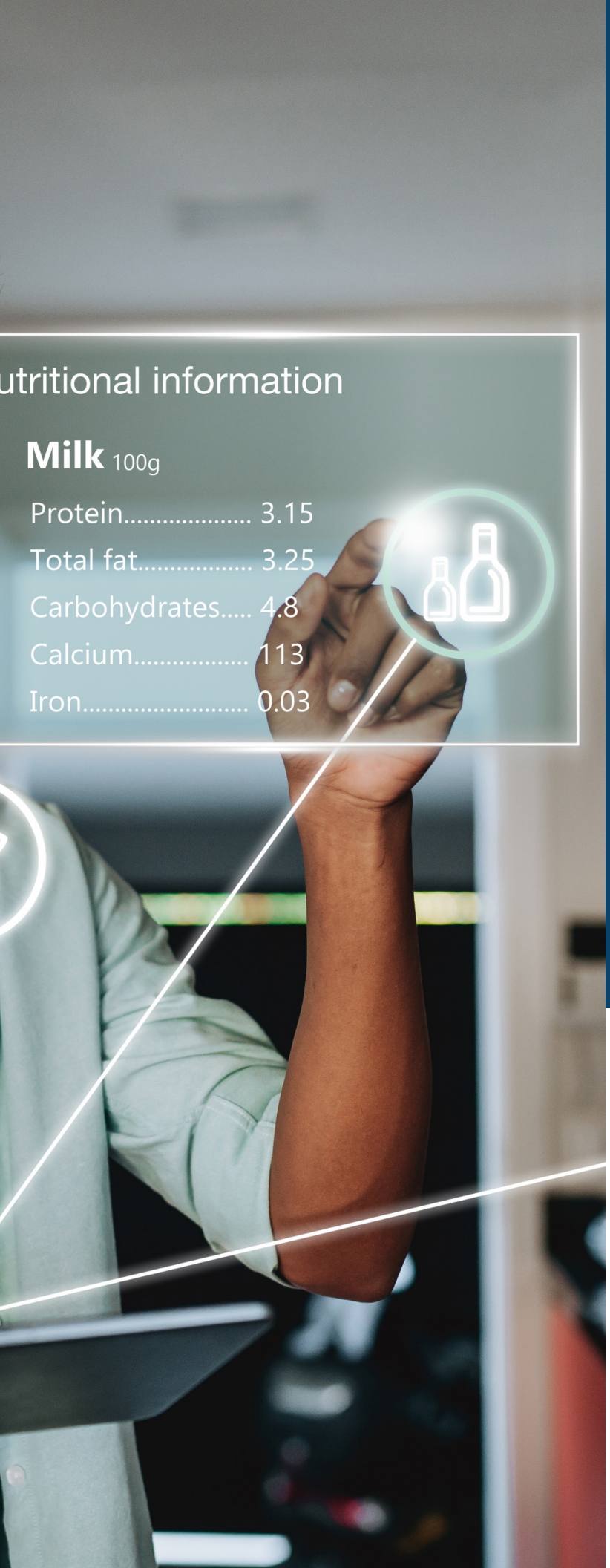
A survey of U.S. adults by The Food is Medicine Institute at Tufts University, a leading organization in the field, found widespread agreement that diet-related medical conditions are a top health concern for U.S. adults.[55] Additionally, survey respondents expressed high interest in Food is Medicine services like medically tailored meals and nutrition counseling.

This interest was greater for people experiencing food and nutrition insecurity. Another poll from The Rockefeller Foundation showed that although four in five U.S. adults across demographics, income levels, party affiliations and regions support integrating Food is Medicine programs into U.S. health care, there was low awareness of where to find or access these services.[56]

Momentum for Nutrition Education for Health Professionals

The focus on food for health extends to training health and allied professionals to provide education and patient support for healthy eating. In August 2025, the U.S Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education announced an initiative urging leading medical education organizations to implement comprehensive nutrition education and training. Efforts include adding nutrition education to medical training and continuing education.[57] The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the professional organization representing U.S. registered dietitian nutritionists, joined 14 other medical organizations in voicing support for the inclusion of nutrition education as a core component of medical training.[58]

In addition, leading nutrition organizations voiced support for recommending Food Is Medicine interventions for patients using GLP-1 medications for obesity.[11] The expansion of Food Is Medicine programs and nutrition education could include innovative programs in both clinical and community settings. Culinary medicine, which combines evidence-based nutrition, cooking instruction and clinical care, is a practical extension of the Food Is Medicine movement.[59] Currently, more than 55 medical schools, residency programs and nursing schools are using a culinary medicine curriculum called Health meets Food.[60] Culinary teaching extends to a growing number of hospitals, where patients can learn to create healthy recipes. Among hospitals with these programs are the Yale School of Medicine, Boston Medical Center and Veterans Affairs facilities throughout the country.[61,62,63]



Implications for Education and Health Professionals

- Health professionals, especially registered dietitian nutritionists, are positioned to play a key role in delivering nutrition education, including both direct patient education and professional development for other health care providers.
- Partnerships between health care, community organizations and food systems that integrate food access, education and social connection are essential to effectively implement Food Is Medicine strategies.
- Recognizing cultural food practices and tailoring nutrition education to individual needs can enhance relevance and engagement, particularly in diverse communities.
- Nutrition interventions that incorporate cooking, flavor and shared meals can not only improve diet quality but also foster improved mental health, community belonging and enjoyment.

Precision Nutrition

Artificial intelligence is being adopted across the food and nutrition landscape, from manufacturing to healthcare applications. Ongoing developments in AI are making personalized nutrition increasingly precise, tailoring guidance to individual biology, preferences and lifestyle.[64,65]

AFTERWORD

Whole-Milk Comeback

Dairy foods like yogurt, butter and cheese are experiencing record growth. Beyond taste, affordability and versatility, consumers increasingly choose dairy to meet diverse health and wellness goals. Whole-milk dairy foods are receiving renewed attention as science continues to evolve our understanding of dietary fats. A growing body of evidence shows that whole-milk dairy is not linked to adverse health outcomes, and credible research demonstrates its neutral to positive health benefits.[66] The verdict is finally in: Whole dairy foods, when consumed at recommended intakes, fit within healthy, balanced eating patterns.

This evolving perspective reflects a broader shift in nutrition science from evaluating single nutrients to examining whole foods and dietary patterns. Central to this shift is the concept of the dairy matrix, which is characterized by the complex interaction of nutrients, bioactive compounds, and unique physical structure that shapes digestion, absorption, and physiological effects of consuming dairy foods.[67] This unique matrix helps to explain why dairy foods have benefits despite saturated fat, sodium or sugar content. Common processing techniques like fermentation, heat treatment and aging further modify the dairy matrix, creating a diverse array of desirable and nutritious dairy foods like cheese and yogurt.

Dietary guidance, policy and regulations are also moving towards the acceptance of whole fat dairy. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently approved the first-ever qualified health claim for yogurt, regardless of sugar or fat content, recognizing a potential link between its regular consumption and a reduced risk of type 2 diabetes.[68] The federal administration has also acknowledged the evidence on whole fat dairy's health benefits indicating a potential shift in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, expected to be released in early 2026. Finally, bipartisan support from Congress led to the passage of the *Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act*, providing schools with the option of serving whole and 2% milk, in addition to the current low-fat and fat-free options offered.[69]

Consumer demands, scientific evidence and dietary recommendations are coming together to underscore dairy's evolving and important role in health promoting diets.

Explore our Healthy Eating TABLE on Healthy Aging.

See how food supports health and well-being across the life span.

Download Our Ultra-Processed Foods Handout.

Get a clear, user-friendly overview of how processing foods impacts diet quality.

Watch the Dairy Matrix webinar.

Learn how whole dairy foods work together to support health.

Watch our Trends Reels.

Explore short videos with key insights on our website.

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