

Youth and the Future of Food

What youth know, care about, and do might make or break the future for healthy, sustainable food and food systems.

Sustainable food systems and diets have become critical areas of focus in nutrition, health, agriculture, food production, and environmental sectors — and among consumers, including youth, who increasingly want to understand the story behind where the foods they eat come from.

The future of sustainability — which includes the future of **food and food systems** — will benefit from youth leadership and voice. That’s the overarching focus of the recently released World Health Organization/UNICEF/Lancet report *A Future for the World’s Children?*, which reinforces the importance of placing children at the heart of the U.N. **Sustainable Development Goals**. The report asserts, “Sustainability is for and about the next generation... We must find better ways to amplify children’s voices and skills for the planet’s healthy future.”

But in the U.S. today, are youth aware and knowledgeable enough to have a voice, be leaders, and even make informed decisions in their own daily lives about “food that’s good for me and good for the planet”?

Given that less than two percent of the U.S. population today farms, the average American is disconnected from agriculture, conservation, and the land. And we know that among consumers generally there is uncertainty and confusion about what sustainability in the context of food and nutrition actually means. Indeed, the *2019 Food and Health Survey* of the International Food Information Council (IFIC) points out that while environmental sustainability has become increasingly associated



with the foods that we eat as well as our food purchases, “sustainability can mean different things to different people.”

This GENYOUth Insights survey, conducted with a nationally representative sample of teens ages 13 to 18 from across the United States, explores youth perspective on sustainable nutrition: everything from how food plays a role in their lives ... to how much teens know about where their food comes from ... whether (and how much) they connect the food they eat with the health of the planet ... where youth are getting food-related information they trust ... and more.

The findings reveal some surprising disconnects, a hunger among youth to know more, and opportunities for stakeholders throughout the food ecosystem to do more to **help ensure youth can lead, act, and choose wisely in today’s food environment.**

Today’s students have a strong sense of responsibility for their health and wellness. We know because we ask them. GENYOUth Insights elevates youth voice through original, timely research on topics that matter to students and to healthy, high-achieving schools.

This GENYOUth **INSIGHTS** survey was produced with generous funding support from Midwest Dairy and in counsel with Edelman Intelligence.



Key Findings

NUTRITION, TASTE ECLIPSE SUSTAINABILITY IN TEENS' EVERYDAY FOOD LIVES

Youth are twice as likely to think about the healthfulness of their food as its environmental impact. Despite their strong interest in environmental issues today (climate is a leading concern among youth), teens aren't thinking too much about the connection between food and the health of the planet. According to survey results, although youth think a lot about food and eating in their day-to-day lives, they focus a lot more on nutrition and taste than on environmental impact.

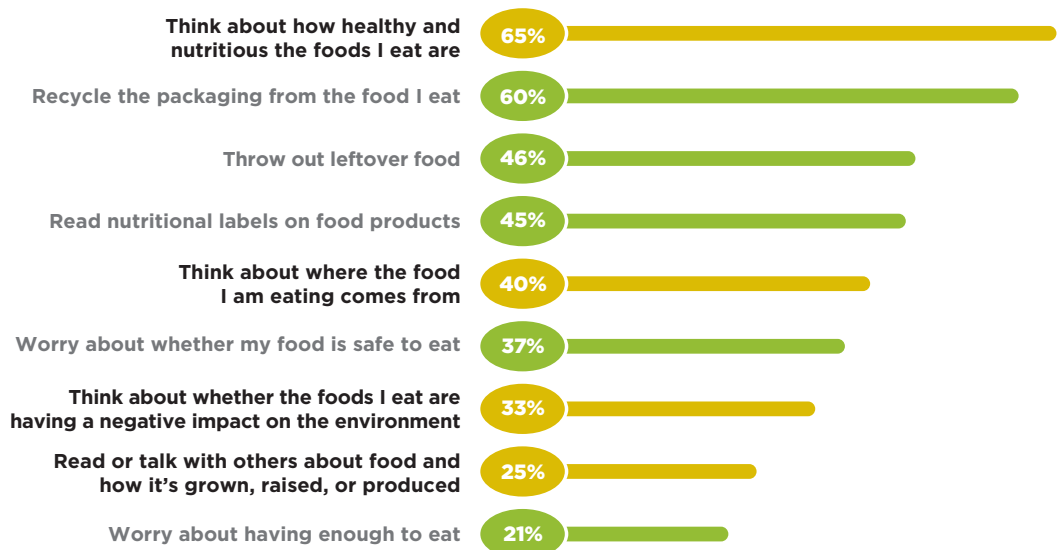
- While 65% of youth say they regularly think about how healthy or nutritious their food is, only 33% think about whether the food they eat has an impact on the environment.
- Well below half of youth (40%) say they regularly think about where the food they eat comes from.
- When making decisions about what they eat or drink, youth think about taste the most (91% of youth think about taste a lot or a moderate amount), followed by cost (76%) and how healthy the food/beverage is (76%), while whether food is produced in an environmentally friendly manner is far behind at 60%.



Although youth care about food and the environment, they don't know much about how the two are connected, where their food comes from, or why it matters. But they are hungry to know more.

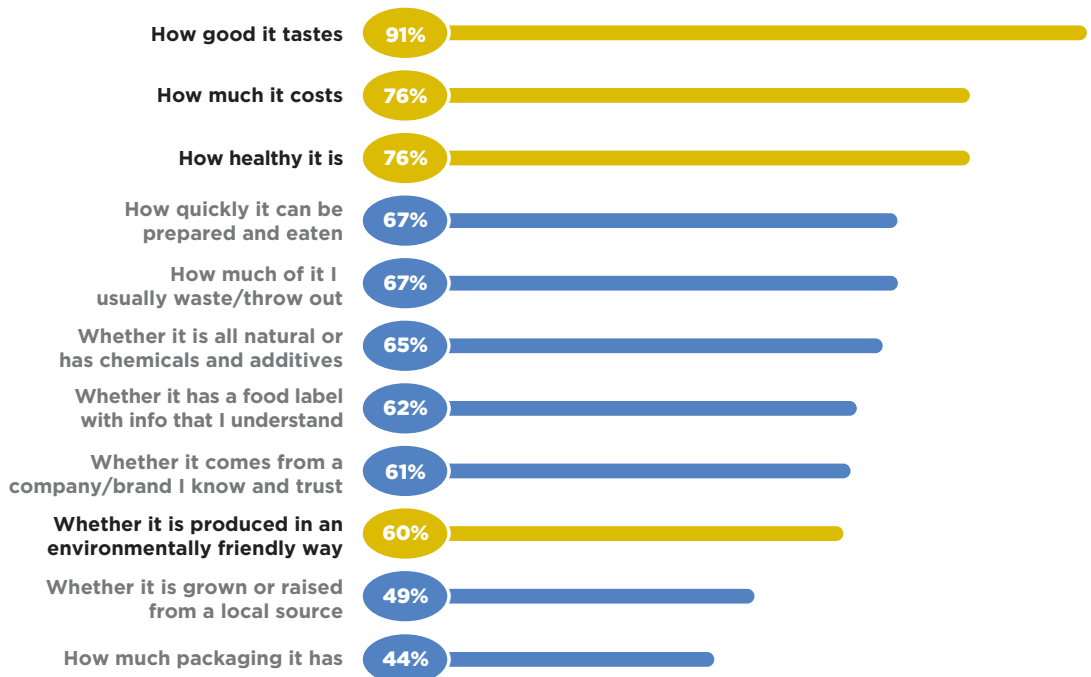
HOW OFTEN DO YOU DO THE FOLLOWING THINGS?

Responses are for "every day" or "weekly"



IN GENERAL, HOW MUCH DO THE FOLLOWING MATTER TO YOU WHEN YOU ARE CHOOSING WHAT TO EAT OR DRINK?

Responses for “matters a lot” and “matters a moderate amount”



MOST TEENS DON'T KNOW OR UNDERSTAND WHERE THEIR FOOD COMES FROM

Almost all youth feel it's important for people to know something about where the food they eat comes from — especially how it's grown or raised and what's been added to it. In fact, only 4% of youth say it's *not* important for a person to know anything about where the food they eat comes from.

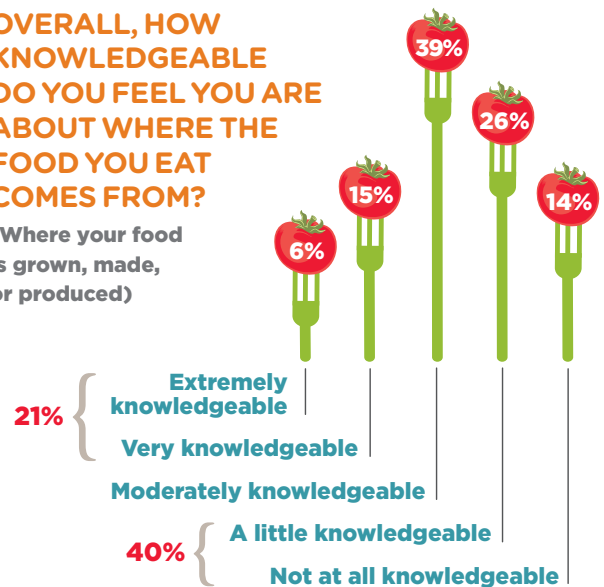
- Yet, only 21% of youth say they actually are very knowledgeable about where their food comes from, while 40% of youth say they know little to nothing at all about the topic.
- The majority of teens say they're personally interested in topics related to how their food is produced — including the issue of producing food in earth-friendly ways (66% of youth are interested), how to feed the world's growing population (62% are interested), and knowing where their food comes from (60% are interested).

BUT YOUTH REALLY WANT TO KNOW MORE

While youth acknowledge they don't know where food comes from, the majority say they want to know more about sustainable nutrition.

OVERALL, HOW KNOWLEDGEABLE DO YOU FEEL YOU ARE ABOUT WHERE THE FOOD YOU EAT COMES FROM?

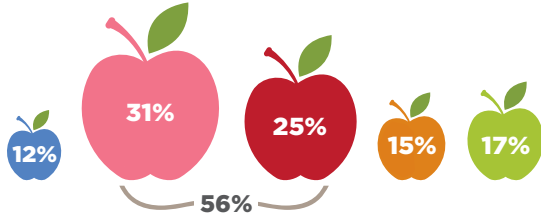
(Where your food is grown, made, or produced)



- Over half of teens (56%) say they want to know more about the idea of “food that's good for me and good for the planet,” including both youth who have heard about this concept before and those who haven't.
- About one in ten youth (12%) say they already know about the concept and that it influences their food choices.

HOW FAMILIAR AND INTERESTED ARE YOU IN THE IDEA OF SUSTAINABLE FOODS?

("Food that's good for me and good for the planet")



- I already know about it and it influences my food and beverage choices
- I heard about it and want to know more
- I never thought of it before, but want to know more
- I heard about it, but I don't really want to know more
- I never thought of it before, and I don't really want to know more

SUSTAINABLE NUTRITION: CAUSE FOR CONFUSION

The survey explored how youth think about the issue of sustainable nutrition. Turns out, in many different ways. The survey introduced the idea of sustainable nutrition to youth as: "Food that is nutritious, safe, healthy, and produced in a way that's good for our environment. Think of it as: Food that's good for me and good for the planet."

- Over 90% of survey respondents say they have some notion of what sustainably produced food means (only 8% of students surveyed say "food that's good for me and good for the planet" does not mean anything to them). Yet, there is great divergence among youth in terms of what attributes they think make food sustainable.
- Survey respondents fall into four groupings based on how they view the defining characteristics of sustainable nutrition, as shown in the chart to the right. Based on a formal definition of sustainable nutrition (see box this page), almost half of youth are missing the mark with an understanding that's either too narrow (e.g., solely a Farm-to-Table focus) or too broad (e.g., an Everything Counts focus), while 28% aren't engaged at all.
- This range of ideas and associations speaks to the opportunity for education among youth to address the potential for confusion that could prevent them from understanding and taking action to lead, act, or make informed food choices.

So, what is Sustainable Nutrition?

"Sustainable diets have low environmental impacts and contribute to food and nutrition security and to a healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy — all while optimizing natural and human resources."

Source: [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations](#)

VARIED PERCEPTIONS

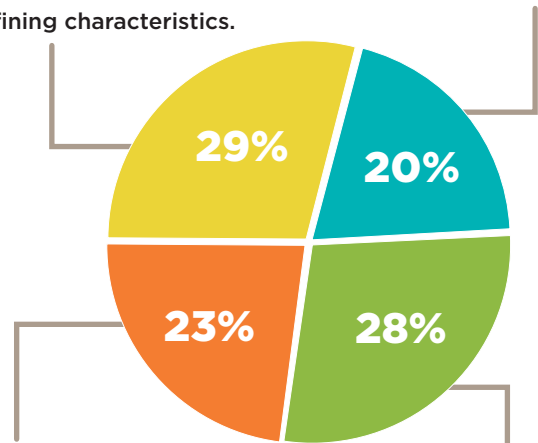
Percent of survey respondents based on how they perceive sustainable nutrition, or "food that's good for me and good for the planet."

Broad Eco Focus

This group, which skews more female than male, equates sustainable nutrition with no/little processing, environmentally friendly farming practices, and good treatment of animals as the defining characteristics.

Farm-to-Table Focus

This group equates sustainable nutrition with food that's produced locally.



Everything Counts

This group thinks of sustainable nutrition as everything in **Broad Eco Focus** and **Farm-to-Table Focus** **plus** they also equate it with food that's organic, has little/no packaging, has no/little processing and no genetic modification, and is plant-based.

Disengaged

This group, which skews more male than female, is simply not interested in the topic.

HELPING YOUTH NAVIGATE THE ISSUE: THOSE MOST EXPECTED TO HELP... AREN'T

Over three-fourths (76%) of teens say that it's hard to know if their food choices are environmentally sustainable. And the vast majority of youth expect food companies, farmers, and food retailers (restaurants and grocery stores) to help them know where food comes from and how to make healthy, sustainable eating choices. But for the most part, they're not.

- Among these food sectors, only farmers are seen as allies in helping youth know where their food comes from. In fact, over two-thirds of youth (64%) say they are interested in visiting a farm and talking with a farmer about these topics.
- Yet currently, neither food companies, restaurants, nor grocery stores are seen by youth as helping them understand where their food comes from.
- In particular, youth view food companies (companies that produce and package food) as actually making it *more difficult* for them to make sustainable, healthy eating choices.
- Importantly, more than four out of five youth (84%) say they want to hear more from companies that produce and sell food about sustainable nutrition issues, and 83% of youth want to hear more from farmers.



Schools also play a key — but currently insufficient — role.

- Schools are helping teens to understand why they should care about food and food-related issues, but youth say that schools are not sufficiently helping them navigate issues related to where food comes from, how it's produced, and the environmental considerations.
- A full 80% of youth believe schools should be doing more to teach them about these sustainable nutrition topics.

WHICH OF THESE GROUPS HELP YOU, MAKE THINGS MORE DIFFICULT FOR YOU, OR HAVE NO IMPACT AT ALL ON YOUR EFFORTS TO DO THE FOLLOWING?

| Percent of youth who say a group "helps me" in each area below | My family | My school | Food companies | Farmers | Restaurants & food stores |
|---|------------|------------|----------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Eat healthy and nutritious foods | 78% | 45% | 28% | 52% | 38% |
| Understand where my food comes from | 59% | 39% | 37% | 57% | 29% |
| Ensure that what I eat does as little harm as possible to the environment | 52% | 37% | 26% | 42% | 25% |
| Ease my food-related concerns | 67% | 37% | 28% | 38% | 27% |
| Understand why I should care about food and food-related issues | 68% | 54% | 29% | 44% | 24% |
| Average for each group | 65% | 42% | 29% | 47% | 29% |

NOTE: Coloration serves as heat map for "helps me" responses, with green colors for highest percentage of youth who say the group help them in a particular area; red colors for lowest percentage of youth who responded "helps me"; and yellow colors for "helps me" percentages in the middle range.

- And 76% of youth say they would be interested in seeing what other youth are doing to make sure the foods we eat are sustainably produced.

When it comes to understanding “food that’s good for me and good for the planet,” youth rely primarily on their families for information and guidance.

- Across the board, teens say their families help them eat healthy, know where food comes from, and make environmentally sound choices in what they eat. Yet, given the high level of consumer confusion about food and sustainability generally (see page 1), teens’ trust in their family as a source of reliable information may be misplaced.

Hunger: An Important Issue for Most Youth

Among sustainable nutrition issues of significance to youth, hunger stands out, both as a condition facing too many teens and as a big concern for most. One out of five teens (21%) worries about whether they will have enough to eat on a daily or weekly basis, while four out of five (80%) are very concerned about helping feed people who don’t have enough to eat.

Youth expect food companies and farmers—and their schools—to keep them informed and help them make healthy, sustainable food choices. But for the most part, that’s not happening now.

Two Key Challenges

Survey results suggest that teens are as confused as adult consumers about what sustainable diets and foods are. It’s also clear that youth care about food and food-related issues and that they are hungry for more information and guidance on how to make sustainably healthy eating choices. Along with their schools, youth expect the food industry, food retailers, and farmers to provide this guidance — but, for the most part, that’s not happening now. This raises two key challenges, and opportunities.

MAKING ROOM FOR SUSTAINABILITY WITHOUT LOSING MOMENTUM ON PROPER NUTRITION

Over the past several decades, much great work has been done to build awareness and educate youth about making nutritious food choices. And that effort has paid off — and certainly is evident in survey respondents’ awareness of nutrition, healthy eating habits, and addressing food waste as well as their interest in reducing food packaging. Survey results also show a latent interest among youth in

knowing more about (and even taking action on) where their food comes from and how to make food choices that are “good for me and good for the planet” — which aligns with a growing interest and sense of urgency among consumers, the food industry, farmers, and many others about the future of food and sustainability.

But can we expect teens to take on another food-related concern, especially when sustainable nutrition considerations and consequences are remote from their daily experiences? Additionally, the attributes many of today’s youth expect of food that’s sustainable — such as locally grown, organic, and free of pesticides — may be too expensive or hard to scale in order to feed a hungry world.

Survey results suggest that there are many who can help they better understand sustainable nutrition issues, and teens want and expect them to do so.

FOOD INDUSTRY AND FARMERS: THE OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME TRUSTED YOUTH ALLIES AND SUPPORTERS ALONG WITH SCHOOLS

Youth are looking for guidance and help. Youth want and expect the sectors that produce, package, and provide food and beverages to help them know

more about and make better choices when it comes to sustainable nutrition. They also expect schools to do more.

How can the food industry and farmers become helpful and effective messengers around sustainable nutrition information to support youth? How can schools play a bigger role in helping youth know, think about, and act on the connection between food that’s “good for me” and “good for the planet”?

Survey results suggest that there’s an opportunity for the food industry, food retailers, and farmers/agriculture to become allies that inform, educate, and address teens’ interest in sustainability. Along with schools, these food-related sectors can shift to become supporters that engage and inform youth so they can be champions for themselves and their healthy future.

The Bottom Line

“Eating better” means more than nutrients and personal health. It also means where food comes from, how it was produced and packaged, where it’s available and to whom, how it impacts communities, animals, and the planet. It’s about the inherent trade-offs and tensions between nutrition and health and the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of food, nutrition, and eating. And how we all must take part in helping to sustain a fragile planet.

The astonishing power of aware, engaged, passionate youth is being brought home to us daily through the intelligence and insight youth are bringing to vitally important societal issues (as a remarkable example, look no further than Swedish teenager **Greta Thunberg** as the face of the climate-change movement). In many ways, the future really is in the hands of empowered, committed young people.

The future of food and food systems will benefit from youth leadership and voice. Youth perspective can drive demand for healthy, sustainable foods . . . can influence food consumption choices and habits . . . can lead to greater sensitivity to cultural diversity and economic disparities as they relate to food . . . and can influence food producers and systems. Aware, informed, and engaged youth can be a powerful force for the movement toward food that’s “good for me and good for the planet.”

Trust in the Time of COVID-19

The issue of knowing and trusting where food comes from has taken on even greater significance in light of the novel coronavirus pandemic. According to data from **Nielsen Global Intelligence**, consumers will be seeking greater assurance about the products they buy, particularly with respect to food. “In the short term, this intensified demand from consumers will require manufacturers, retailers, and other related industry players to clearly communicate why their products and supply chains should be trusted. In the longer term ... it may speed up a re-think on how shoppers evaluate purchases and the benefits that they see as the key factors to consider.” The time is ripe for the food industry, farmers, and schools to help inform and educate youth, and other consumers, on vital sustainable nutrition issues.

We are in a time of opportunity, as young change-makers convene, collaborate, and connect to make a difference in the world generally and for a sustainably healthy future. Let’s support them in every way possible.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

To lead, act, and choose wisely, youth need and want a better understanding of where their food comes from and how the food they eat connects with the health of our planet. The food, farming, and education sectors, and students themselves, can all help to make a difference.

Food Industry can support youth well-being through business practices, outreach, information-sharing, and social responsibility activities. For example: At point of purchase and on packages, provide youth and other customers with information on where food comes from and how it was sustainably produced. Engage in dialogue with youth through schools, social media, events, and outreach programs. Invite youth input on your products, practices, and innovation challenges (see GENYOUth’s **AdCap Challenge** as an example).

Farmers can engage with the **Farm to School Network** or the **dairy council** in your community or state. Share your story via school visits, the media, your website, and outreach with other community partners to help youth understand how agriculture nourishes us as well as helps protect the land, animals, communities, and the planet. How farmers care for the environment, are stewards of the land, and take care of their animals is part of this equation.

Schools and Educators can model sustainably healthy practices in the classroom, the cafeteria, and throughout the school community. They can expand a traditional focus on the nutritional and health focus of foods to also help students learn about the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of food, nutrition, and eating. And how we all must take part in helping to sustain a fragile planet. (Discovery Education provides engaging and **interactive resources** to help students learn about modern farming.)

Students can be participants, leaders, champions, and influencers for their own healthy futures. Students: Let companies know what you like, what you need, and how to improve their offerings and information for you and your peers. Visit a farm — online or in person — and learn more. Help create a healthy school that prioritizes “food that’s good for me and good for the planet” (**Fuel Up to Play 60** has information and opportunities for students to learn, grow, connect, and make a difference in their school communities). ■

METHODOLOGY

Online survey conducted February 11 to 28, 2020 with a nationally representative sample of over 1,700 middle, junior, and senior high school students, ages 13-18, including 1,198 youth affiliated with GENYOUth programs and initiatives (e.g., Fuel Up to Play 60 and AdVenture Capital) and 507 youth in a control group. Results were statistically weighted to ensure a representative group by gender, age, race/ethnicity, and geography. An advisory committee of health, education, nutrition, and youth engagement experts and practitioners provided guidance on the research topic, hypothesis, and online survey content. Two waves of student focus groups (conducted by phone conference) were held to inform the survey content and questions.

THANK YOU...

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