



Many Americans improving their diet

I met some friends for lunch, and we all realized we're eating better than we used to. Some of us think it's because we're "older and wiser," but some think everyone is eating better these days. Any idea who's right?

It's probably a combination of both. As we age, our bodies generally need fewer calories, partly because of age-related loss of lean muscle mass. (Most adults lose 2 to 3 percent of muscle for each decade that passes.) So, older adults may end up eating less. If that's one of your markers for "eating more healthfully," aging could have something to do with it.

But there does appear to be a cultural shift in the U.S. as well. A January 2014 study from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service reports that the average diet quality of American adults improved between 2005 and 2010. Over those years, working-age adults tended to eat fewer calories overall, fewer calories from fat and saturated fat, and less cholesterol and more fiber. Older adults (those who were 60 and older in 2005-2006), didn't report much change in calorie intake, but did report improvements in other areas.

The analysts concluded Americans were eating better during those years for a number of reasons. First, they pointed to the Great Recession, which began in late 2007. The economic

downturn caused a 12.9 percent drop in spending on food away from home: at restaurants, bars, sports arenas, vending machines, food trucks and other venues where people eat out.

That makes a difference because foods prepared away from home tend to be higher in calories, fat, saturated fat, sodium and cholesterol, and also lower in fiber and calcium.

But the study's authors said the recession didn't explain everything. They also found that Americans are increasingly reading Nutrition Facts labels and looking at health claims on food labels (such as "May reduce the risk of heart disease"). Plus, they noted that other studies have also found that there was more consumer demand — and more availability — of whole grain foods over the years of this analysis. All of this points to an increased focus on nutrition when shopping for food to eat at home, as well. Also, consumers in this study overwhelmingly said they at least sometimes would use nutrition information in making choices at restaurants if the information was readily available.

Whatever the reason, the finding that many Americans are eating better puts you and your friends in good company.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1043, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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