Consumer Beliefs about Healthy Foods and Diets

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Background

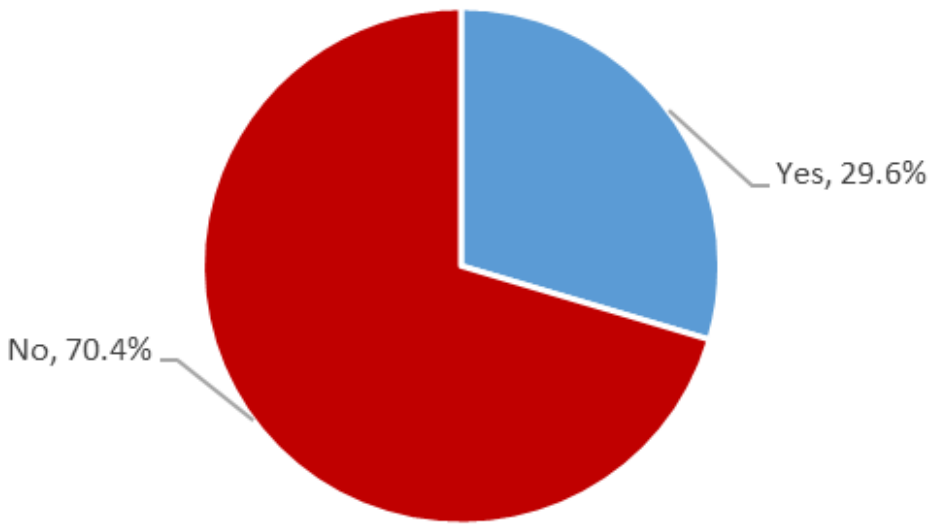
- **FDA public request for comments asked for feedback on**
  - **“Is the term ‘healthy’ most appropriately categorized as a claim based only on nutrient content?”**
  - **“What is consumer’s understanding of the meaning of the term “healthy” as it relates to food?”**
  - **“What are consumers’ expectations of foods that carry a “healthy” claim?”**
  - **“We are especially interested in any data or other information that evaluates whether or not consumers associate, confuse, or compare the term “healthy” with other descriptive terms and claims”**

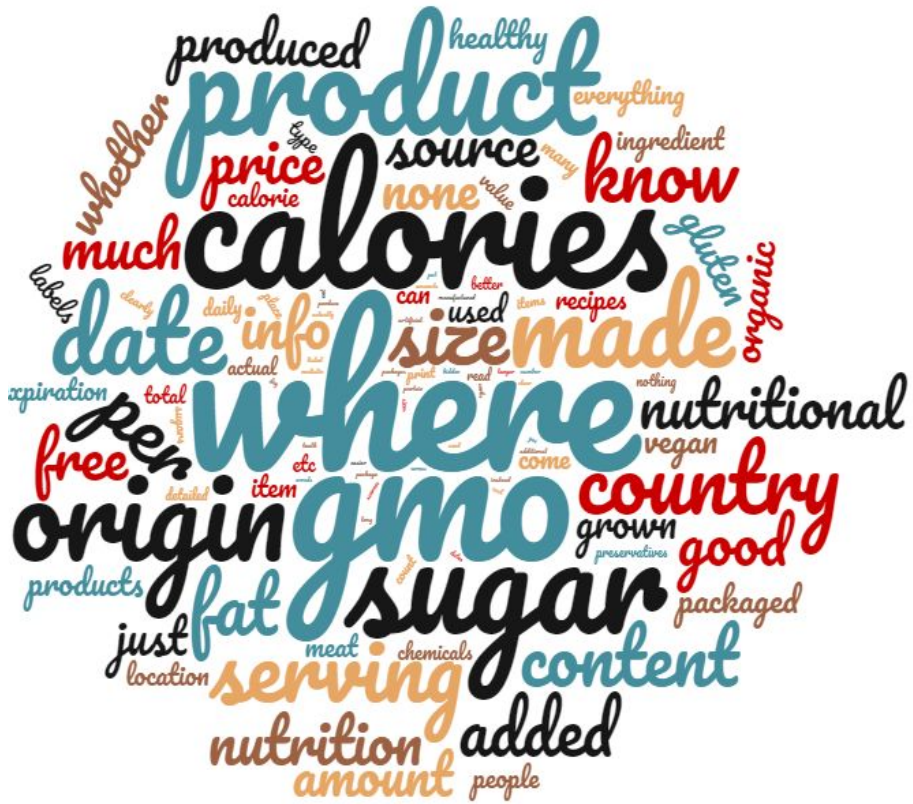
FDA. Proposed Rule. “Use of the Term ‘‘Healthy” in the Labeling of Human Food Products; Request for Information and Comments.” Federal Register 81:66562–66565. September 28, 2016

Methods

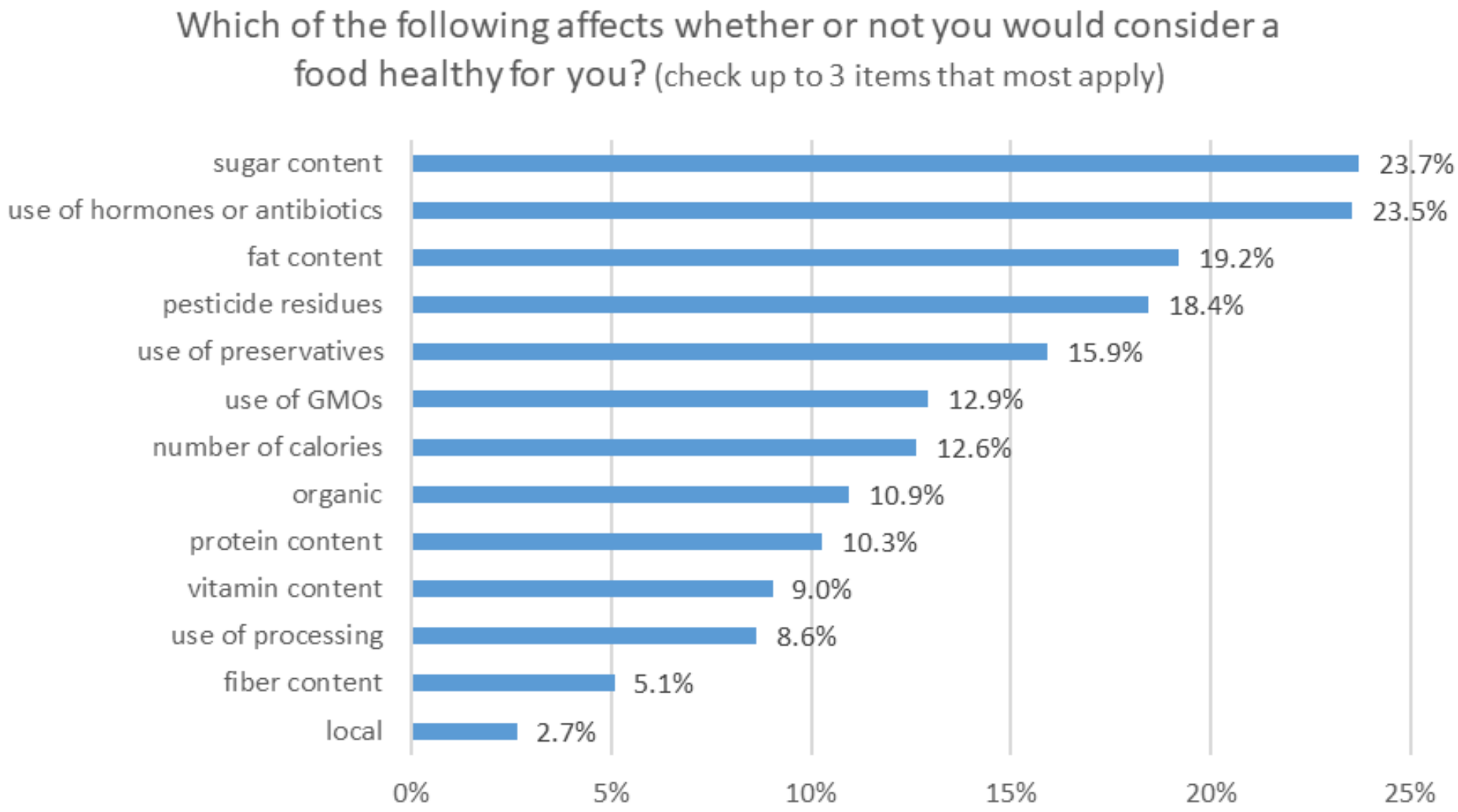
- **A nationwide U.S. sample of 1,290 consumers was surveyed in December 2018**
- **Respondents answered 15 questions designed to gauge perceptions of healthy food and to elicit preference for policies surrounding healthy food definitions**
- **Responses are weighted to demographically match the population**
- **Categorical variables have a sampling error of ± 2.7%**

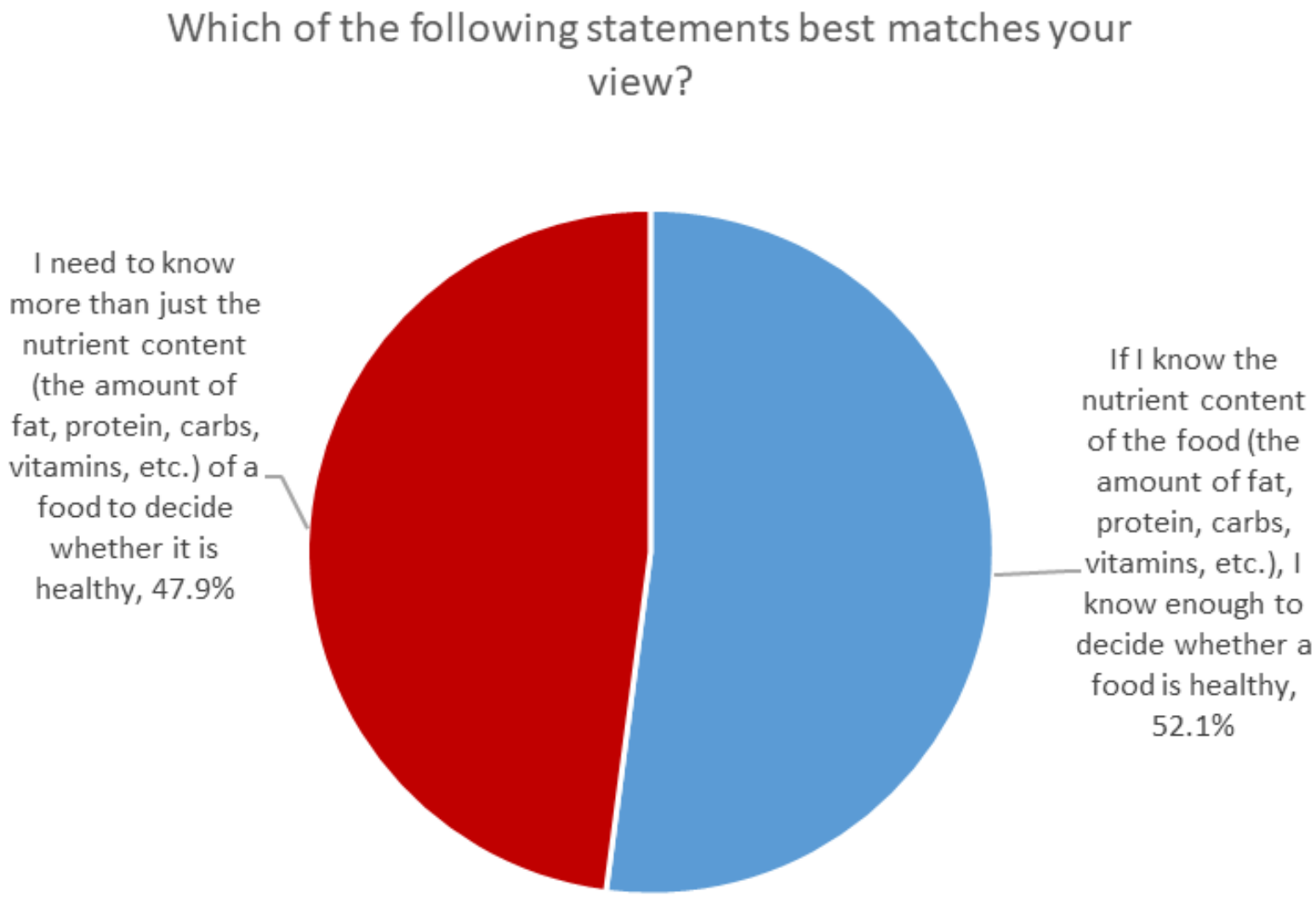
Is there additional information you would like to see on food packages that is not typically there?

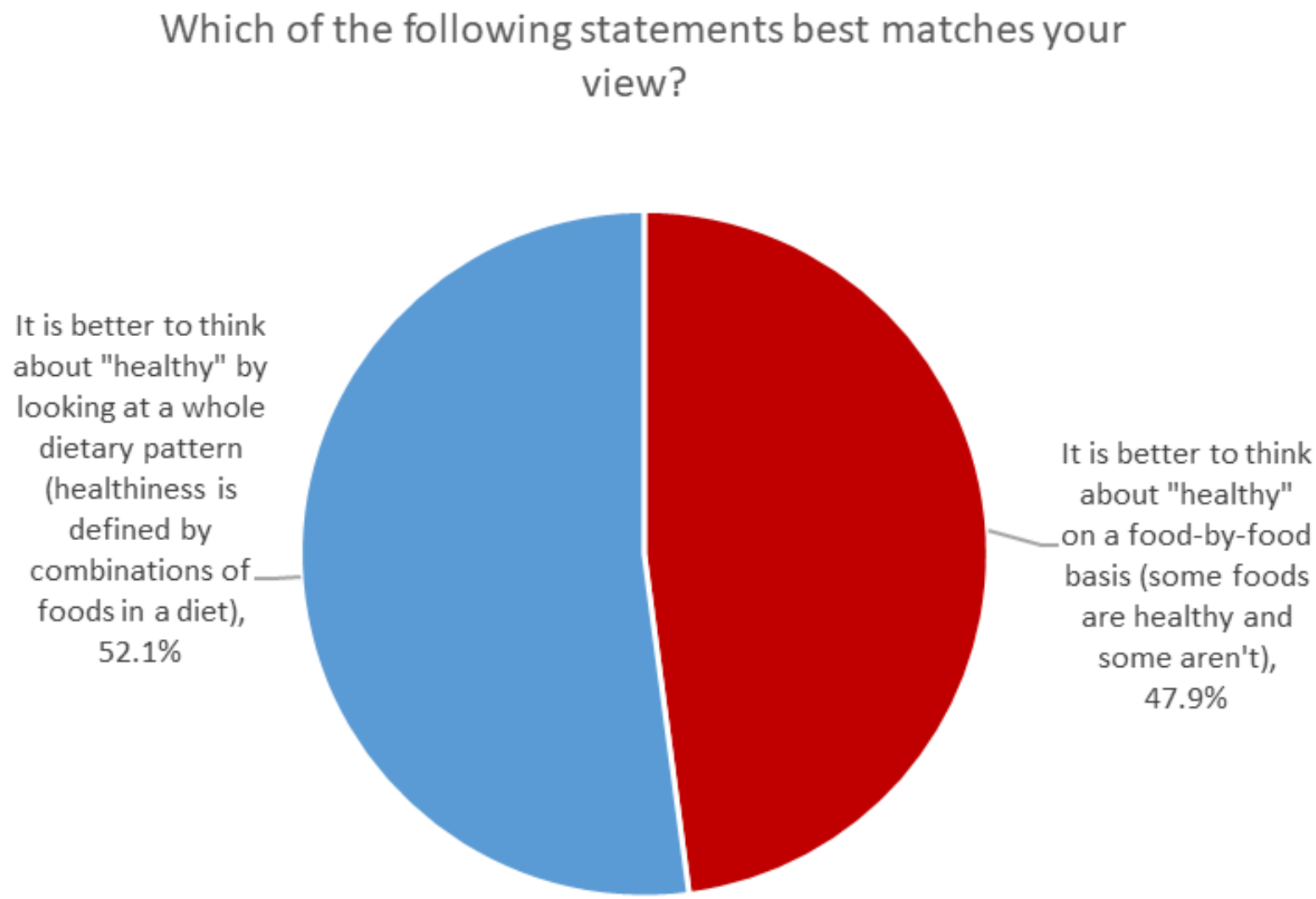




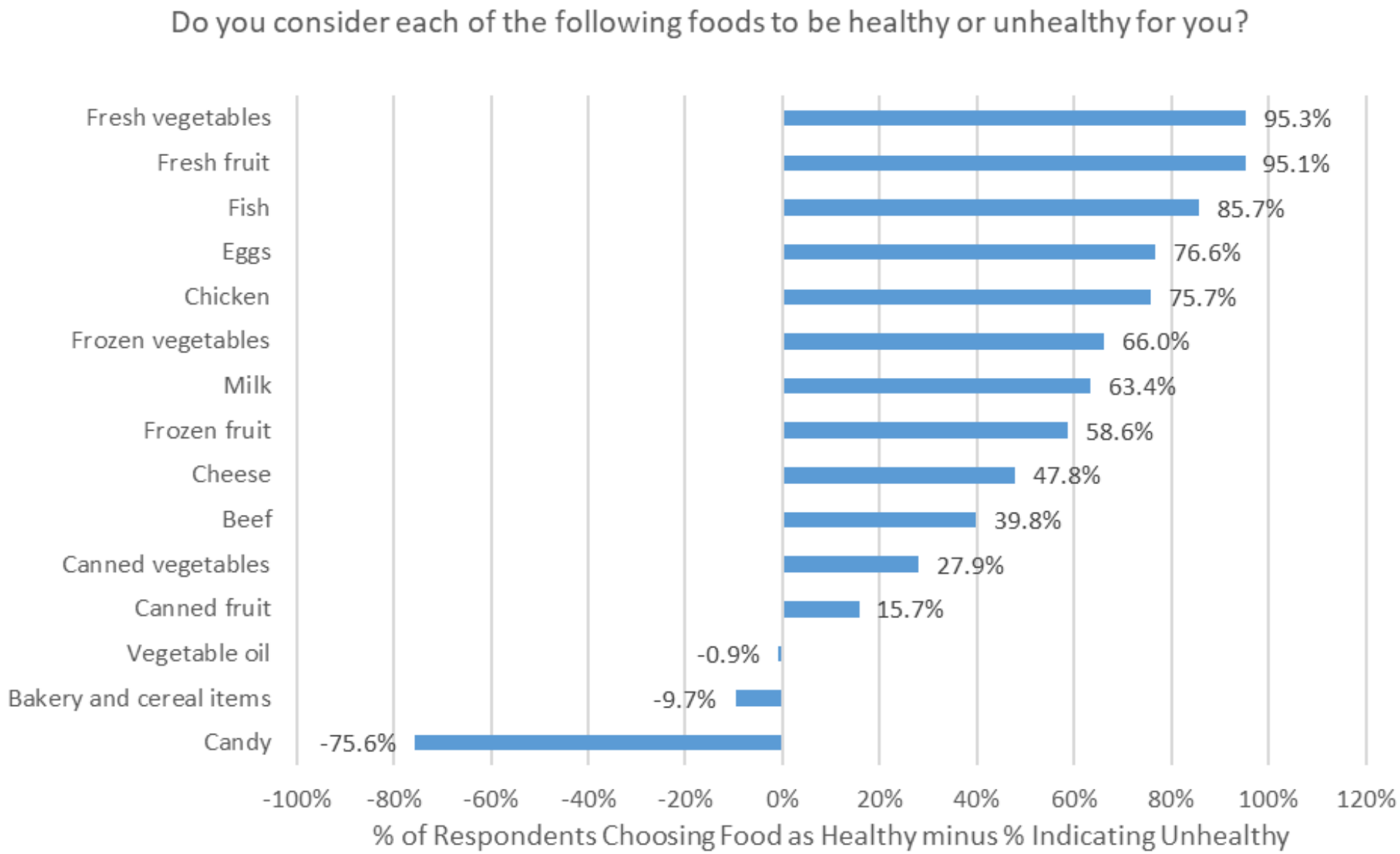
“What does it mean to you for a food to be called ‘healthy’?”

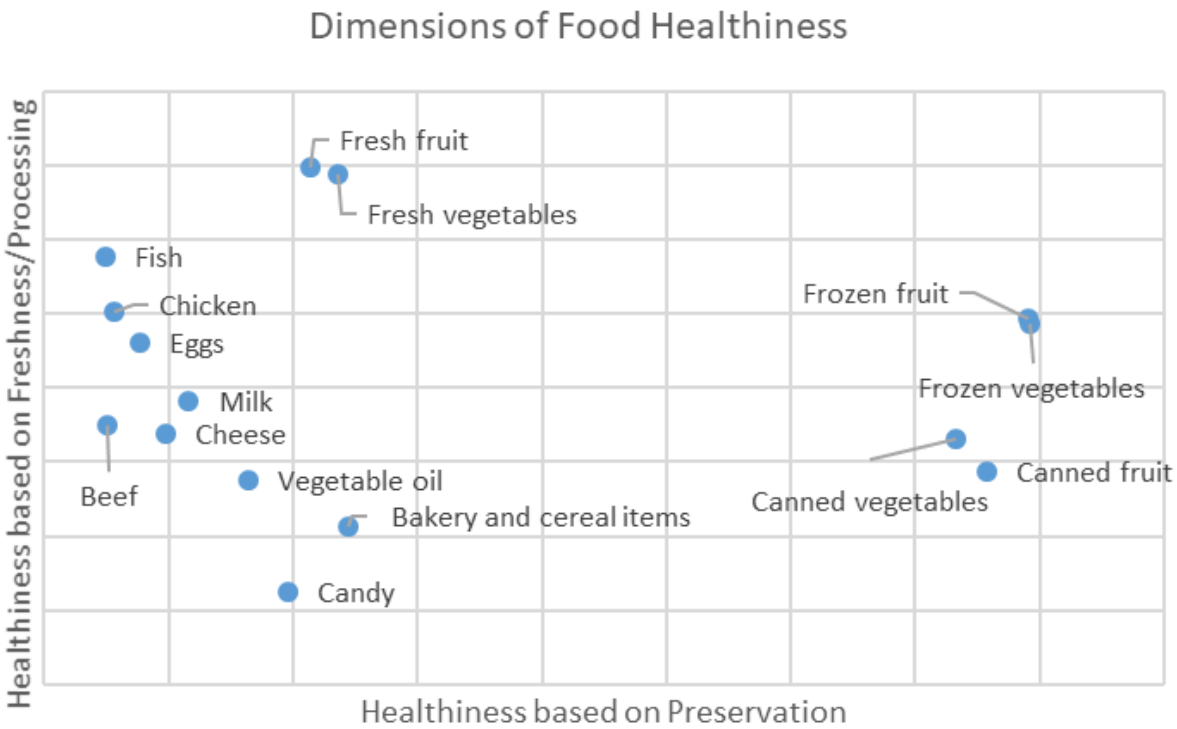

Which of the following affects whether or not you would consider a food healthy for you? (check up to 3 items that most apply)
sugar content
23.7%
use of hormones or antibiotics
23.5%
fat content
19.2%
pesticide residues
18.4%
use of preservatives
15.9%
use of GMOs
12.9%
number of calories
12.6%
organic
10.9%
protein content
10.3%
vitamin content
9.0%
use of processing
8.6%
fiber content
5.1%
local
2.7%
0%
5%
10%
15%
20%
25%

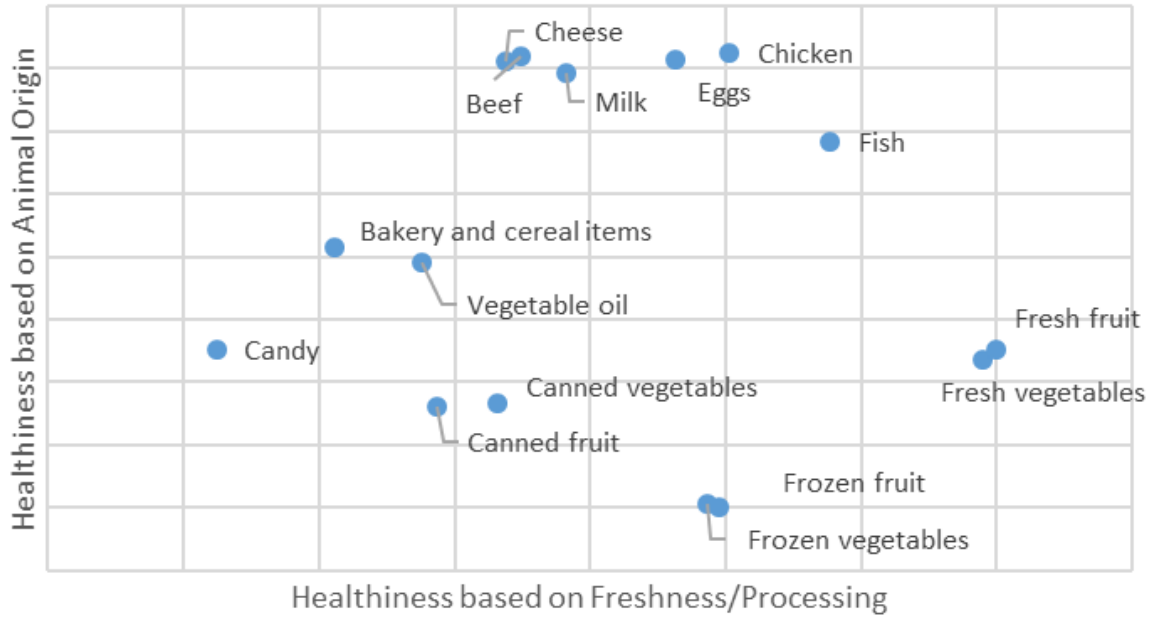

Which of the following statements best matches your view?
I need to know more than just the nutrient content (the amount of fat, protein, carbs, vitamins, etc.) of a food to decide whether it is healthy, 47.9%
If I know the nutrient content of the food (the amount of fat, protein, carbs, vitamins, etc.), I know enough to decide whether a food is healthy, 52.1%

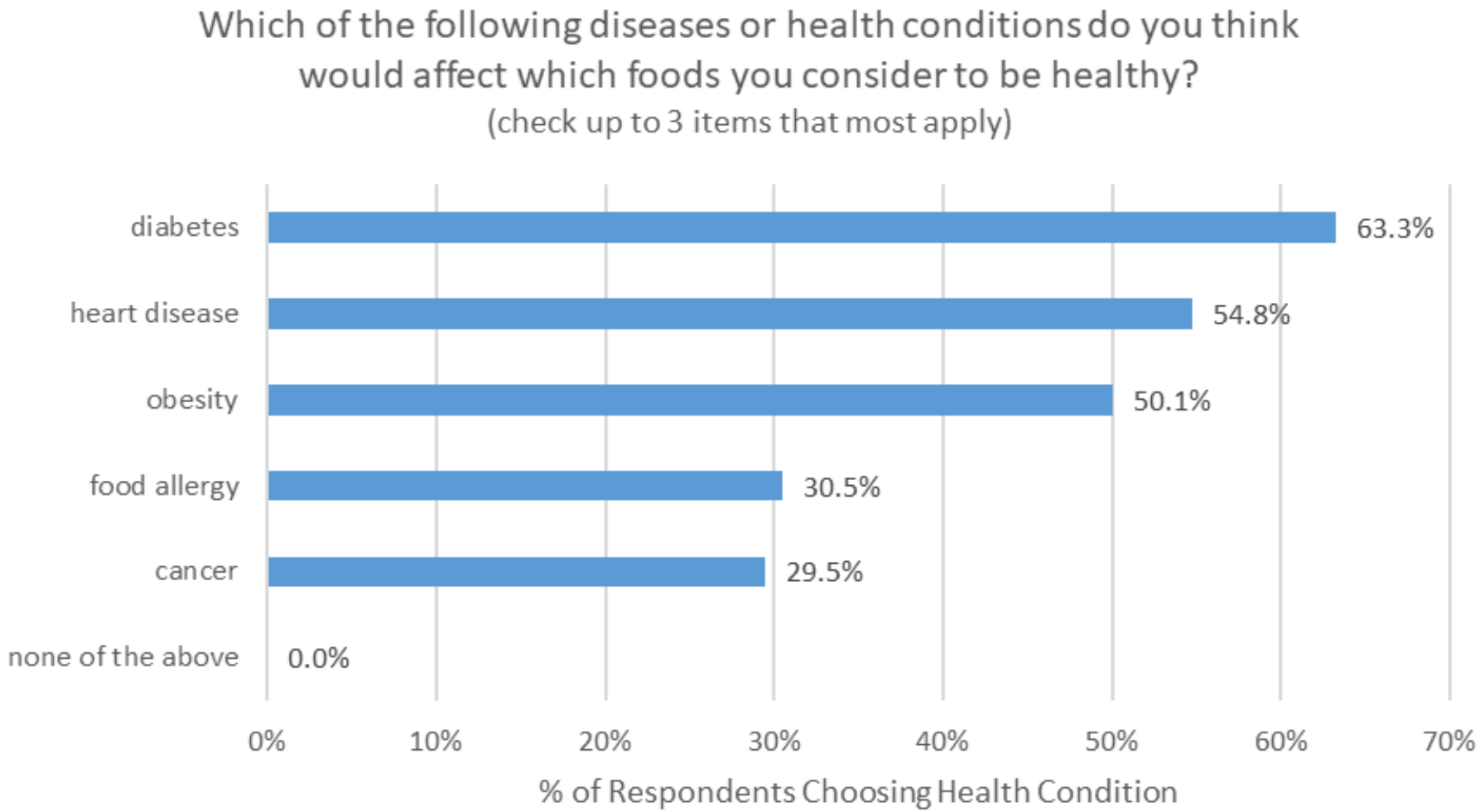

Which of the following statements best matches your view?
It is better to think about "healthy" by looking at a whole dietary pattern (healthiness is defined by combinations of foods in a diet), 52.1%
It is better to think about "healthy" on a food-by-food basis (some foods are healthy and some aren't), 47.9%

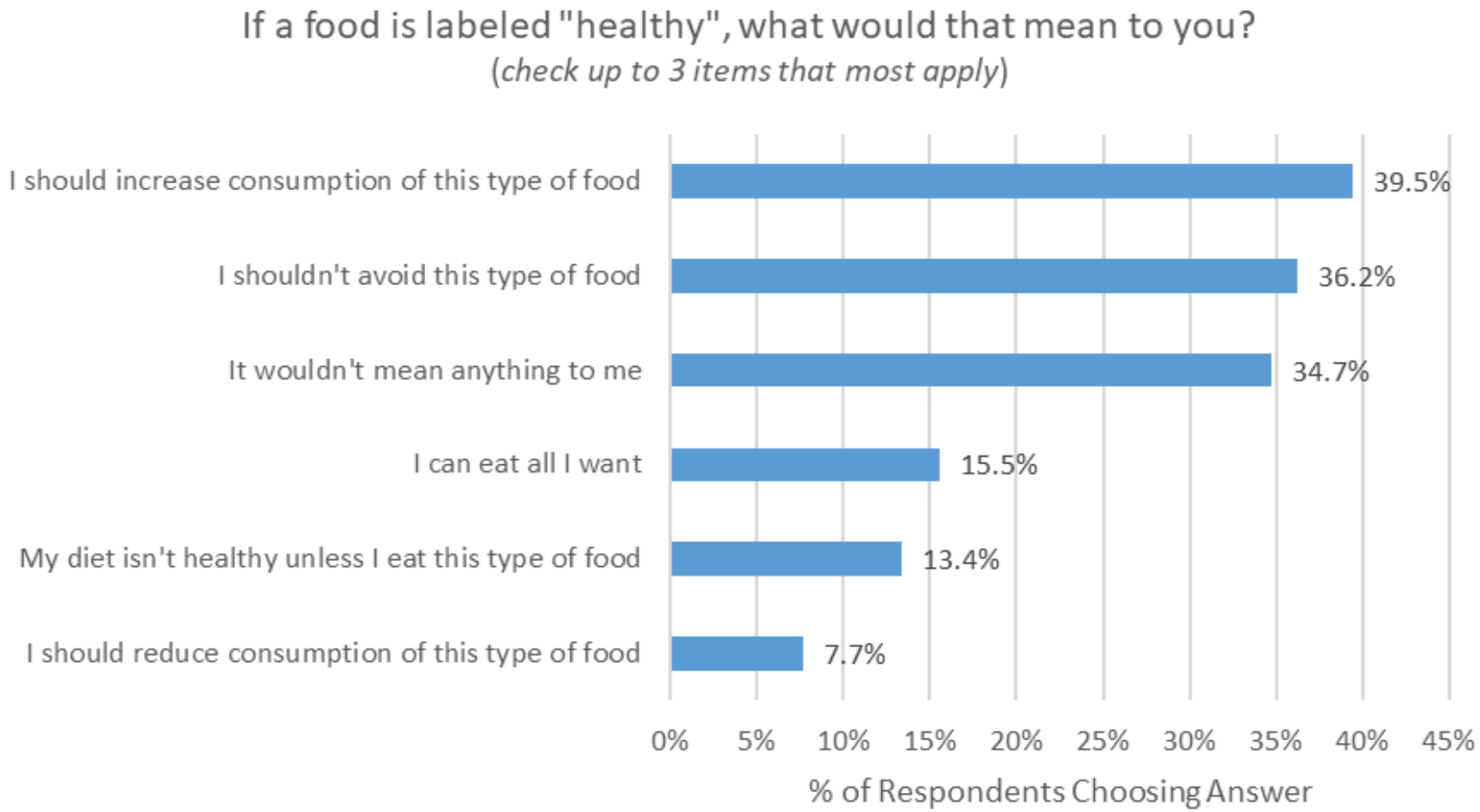
	Single foods can be considered healthy or unhealthy	Only a whole diet can be considered healthy or unhealthy
Healthiness based on nutrients alone	**26.5% (Food-Nutrient Focus: health based on a food's nutrients)**	**25.6% (Diet-Nutrient Focus: health based on nutrients from whole diet)**
Healthiness based on more than nutrient content	**21.4% (Food-Nonnutritive Focus: health based on a food's entire composition)**	**26.5% (Diet-Nonnutritive Focus: health based on holistic consumption pattern)**

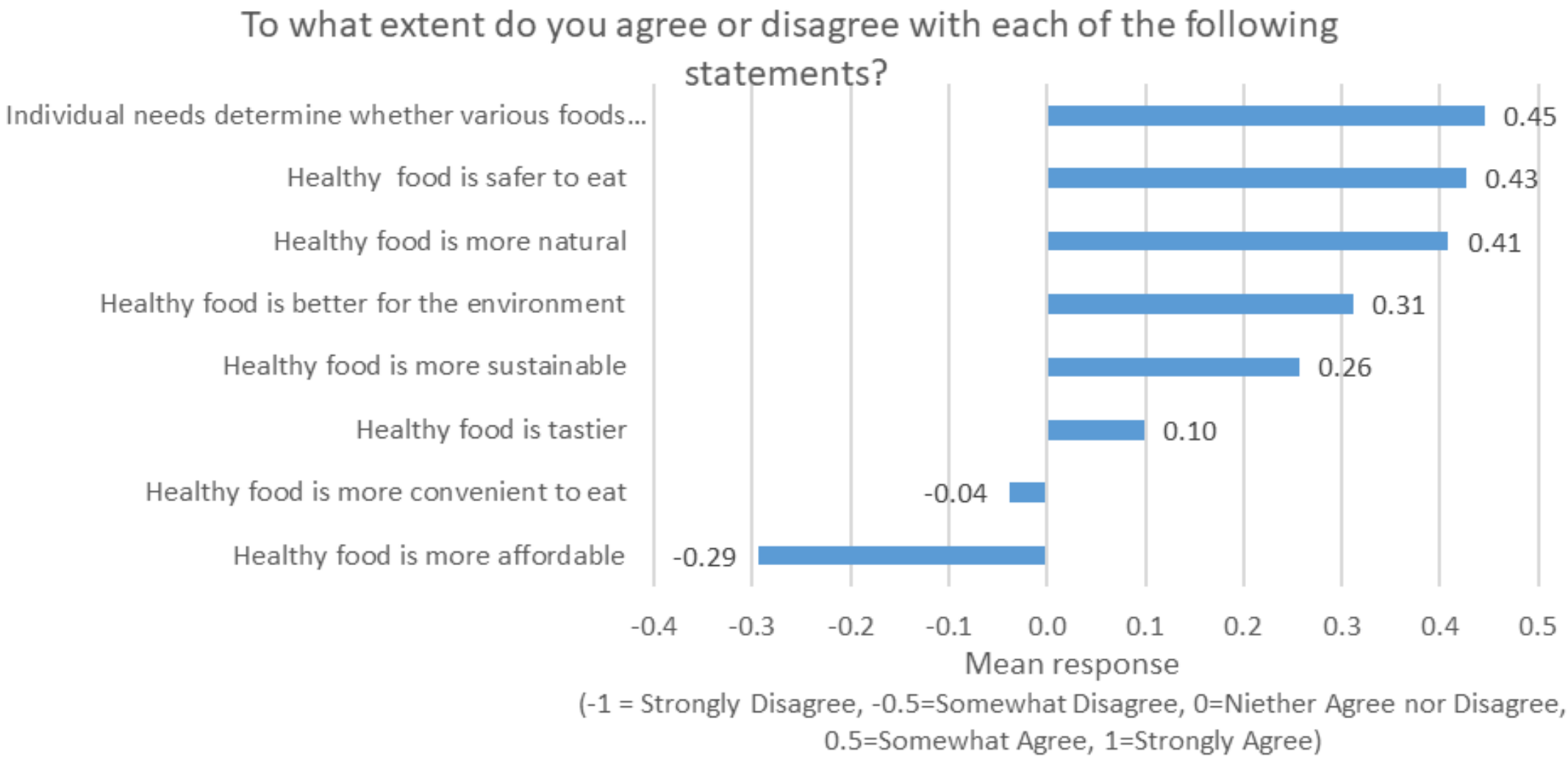

Do you consider each of the following foods to be healthy or unhealthy for you?
Fresh vegetables
Fresh fruit
Fish
Eggs
Chicken
Frozen vegetables
Milk
Frozen fruit
Cheese
Beef
Canned vegetables
Canned fruit
Vegetable oil
Bakery and cereal items
Candy
95.3%
95.1%
85.7%
76.6%
75.7%
66.0%
63.4%
58.6%
47.8%
39.8%
27.9%
15.7%
-0.9%
-9.7%
-75.6%
-100%
-80%
-60%
-40%
-20%
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
120%
% of Respondents Choosing Food as Healthy minus % Indicating Unhealthy


Dimensions of Food Healthiness
Healthiness based on Freshness/Processing
Healthiness based on Preservation
Fresh fruit
Fresh vegetables
Fish
Chicken
Eggs
Milk
Cheese
Beef
Vegetable oil
Bakery and cereal items
Candy
Frozen fruit
Frozen vegetables
Canned fruit
Canned vegetables


Healthiness based on Animal Origin
Healthiness based on Freshness/Processing
Cheese
Chicken
Beef
Milk
Eggs
Fish
Bakery and cereal items
Vegetable oil
Fresh fruit
Candy
Canned vegetables
Fresh vegetables
Canned fruit
Frozen fruit
Frozen vegetables


Which of the following diseases or health conditions do you think would affect which foods you consider to be healthy?
(check up to 3 items that most apply)
diabetes
63.3%
heart disease
54.8%
obesity
50.1%
food allergy
30.5%
cancer
29.5%
none of the above
0.0%
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
% of Respondents Choosing Health Condition


If a food is labeled "healthy", what would that mean to you?
(check up to 3 items that most apply)
I should increase consumption of this type of food
39.5%
I shouldn't avoid this type of food
36.2%
It wouldn't mean anything to me
34.7%
I can eat all I want
15.5%
My diet isn't healthy unless I eat this type of food
13.4%
I should reduce consumption of this type of food
7.7%
0%
5%
10%
15%
20%
25%
30%
35%
40%
45%
% of Respondents Choosing Answer


To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
Individual needs determine whether various foods...
Healthy food is safer to eat
Healthy food is more natural
Healthy food is better for the environment
Healthy food is more sustainable
Healthy food is tastier
Healthy food is more convenient to eat
Healthy food is more affordable
0.45
0.43
0.41
0.31
0.26
0.10
-0.04
-0.29
-0.4
-0.3
-0.2
-0.1
0.0
0.1
0.2
0.3
0.4
0.5
Mean response
(-1 = Strongly Disagree, -0.5=Somewhat Disagree, 0=Niether Agree nor Disagree, 0.5=Somewhat Agree, 1=Strongly Agree)

Wrap-up

- **Ratings of individual food products according to healthiness reveals that “healthy” is not a single unifying construct**
- **There was a high level of agreement with the belief that individual needs determine whether various foods are healthy for an individual**
  - **divide between whether food could be deemed healthy based solely on the foods’ nutritional content and whether healthiness is a characteristic of one’s overall diet or individual foods**
  - **further supported by responses indicating that various diseases and health conditions would affect most consumers’ perceptions of what was healthy for them**