Is Sushi ‘Healthy’? What About Granola? Where Americans and Nutritionists Disagree

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We surveyed Americans and a panel of nutrition experts about which foods they thought were good or bad for you.

Here’s what we found.

**Foods considered healthier by the public than by experts**

| Percent describing a food as “healthy” | Nutritionists | Public | Difference |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Granola-bar.pngGranola bar | 28% | 71% | 43 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/CoconutOil.pngCoconut oil | 37% | 72% | 35 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Frozen-Yogurt.pngFrozen yogurt | 32% | 66% | 34 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/1606WTOPANCAKES1.pngGranola | 47% | 80% | 33 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/SlimFast_CMYK.pngSlimFast shake | 21% | 47% | 26 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/orange-juice.pngOrange juice | 62% | 78% | 16 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/AmericanCheese.pngAmerican cheese | 24% | 39% | 15 |

Of the 52 common foods that we asked experts and the public to rate, none had a wider gap than **granola bars**. More than 70 percent of ordinary Americans we surveyed described it as healthy, but less than a third of nutritional experts did. A similar gap existed for **granola**, which less than half of nutritionists we surveyed described as healthy.

Several of the foods considered more healthful by everyday Americans than by experts, including **frozen yogurt**, a **SlimFast shake** and**granola bars,**have something in common: They can contain a lot of added sugar. In May, the Food and Drug Administration [announced](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/21/health/fda-nutrition-labels.html) a new template for nutrition labels, and one priority was to clearly distinguish between sugars that naturally occur in food and sugars that are added later to heighten flavors. ([You’d be surprised](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/upshot/it-isnt-easy-to-figure-out-which-foods-contain-sugar.html) how many foods contain added sugar.) It’s possible nutritionists know this, but the public still does not.

**Foods considered healthier by experts than by the public**

| Percent describing a food as “healthy” | Nutritionists | Public | Difference |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Quinoa.pngQuinoa | 89% | 58% | 31 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/FlextarianTofu30.pngTofu | 85% | 57% | 28 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/sushi.pngSushi | 75% | 49% | 26 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/hummus.pngHummus | 90% | 66% | 24 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/wineglass.pngWine | 70% | 52% | 18 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/shrimp.pngShrimp | 85% | 69% | 16 |

On the other end of the spectrum, several foods received a seal of approval from our expert panel but left nonexperts uncertain. Most surprising to us was the reaction to **quinoa**, a “superfood” grain so often praised as healthful that it has become the [subject of](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/04/grain-forecast) satire. (At the moment, The New York Times [cooking site](http://cooking.nytimes.com/) offers [167 recipes](http://cooking.nytimes.com/search?q=quinoa&page=1&f=d) for quinoa, [roughly a third](http://cooking.nytimes.com/search?filters%5bspecial_diets%5d%5b%5d=healthy&q=quinoa&page=1&f=d) of which are explicitly tagged “healthy.”)

In addition, **tofu**, **sushi**, **hummus**, **wine** and **shrimp** were all rated as significantly more healthful by nutritionists than by the public. Why?

One reason may be that many of them are new foods in the mainstream American diet. Our colleague Neil Irwin [measured mentions of trendy foods in Times coverage](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/12/upshot/special-sauce-for-measuring-food-trends-the-fried-calamari-index.html) over the years, and found that quinoa had only recently picked up steam. Others may reflect mixed messages in press coverage of the healthfulness of foods. Shrimp was long maligned for its high rate of dietary cholesterol, though [recent guidelines have changed](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/01/07/new-diet-guidelines-urge-less-sugar-for-all-and-less-meat-for-boys-and-men/). And public messages about the healthfulness of alcohol are conflicting: While [moderate drinking appears to have some health benefits](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/22/upshot/alcohols-effect-on-health-what-the-science-says.html?_r=0), more consumption can obviously have [real health costs](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/health/death-rates-rising-for-middle-aged-white-americans-study-finds.html).

We weren’t surprised to find areas in which both ordinary Americans and experts disagreed.

We expect researchers to be better informed about current research, and everyday consumers to be more susceptible to the health claims of food marketers, even if the claims are somewhat dubious.

But some of the foods in our survey split both the public *and* our panel of experts.

**Foods that both experts and the public have mixed feelings about**

| Percent describing a food as “healthy” | Nutritionists | Public | Difference |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Popcorn.pngPopcorn | 61% | 52% | 9 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Pork-chop.pngPork chops | 59% | 52% | 7 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Milk.pngWhole milk | 63% | 59% | 4 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Steak.pngSteak | 60% | 63% | 3 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/CheddarCheese.pngCheddar cheese | 57% | 56% | 1 |

Four of the foods listed above – **steak**, **cheddar cheese**, **whole milk**and **pork chops** – tend to have a lot of fat. And fat is a topic few experts can agree on. Years ago, the nutritional consensus was that fat, and particularly the saturated fat found in dairy and red meat, was bad for your heart. Newer studies [are less clear](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/13/upshot/are-fats-unhealthy-the-battle-over-dietary-guidelines.html), and many of the fights among nutritionists tend to be about the right amount of protein and fat in a healthy diet.

The uncertainty about these foods, as expressed both by experts and ordinary Americans, reflects the haziness of the nutritional evidence about them. (If you’re a steak lover and you find this news discouraging, our colleague Aaron Carroll [has written](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/31/upshot/red-meat-is-not-the-enemy.html) that red meat is probably fine in moderation.)

It’s clear that many shoppers *do* want to eat healthful foods but are unsure what to choose. To gain some perspective on this, we asked Google which foods were most commonly part of a simple search: “Is [blank] healthy?” We used these results to generate some of our survey questions. The food people were likeliest to ask about was also one nutritionists generally approve of: **sushi**.

There are some areas of nutritional consensus. Nearly everyone agreed that **oranges**, **apples**, **oatmeal** and **chicken** could safely be described as healthy, and also agreed that **chocolate chip cookies**,**bacon**, **white bread** and [**soda**](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/upshot/soda-industry-struggles-as-consumer-tastes-change.html)could not.

**Foods that both groups think are unhealthy**

| Percent describing a food as “healthy” | Nutritionists | Public | Difference |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Cheeseburger.pngHamburgers | 28% | 29% | 1 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Jerky.pngBeef jerky | 23% | 27% | 4 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Pepsi.pngDiet soda | 18% | 16% | 2 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/WhiteBread.pngWhite bread | 15% | 18% | 3 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Cookie.pngChocolate chip cookies | 6% | 10% | 4 |

**Foods that both groups think are healthy**

| Percent describing a food as “healthy” | Nutritionists | Public | Difference |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/apple.pngApples | 99% | 96% | 3 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/orange.pngOranges | 99% | 96% | 3 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/NonGMO-2.pngOatmeal | 97% | 92% | 5 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/RoastChicken.pngChicken | 91% | 91% | 0 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Turkey.pngTurkey | 91% | 90% | 1 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/PeanutButter.pngPeanut butter | 81% | 79% | 2 |
| https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2016/06/22/whats-healthy/467fdbb99aa44afdb4565e7653dbcb5b4fc4c042/photos/Potato.pngBaked potatoes | 72% | 71% | 1 |

Where does this leave a well-meaning but occasionally confused shopper? Reassured, perhaps: Nutrition science is sometimes murky even to experts.

Your overall diet probably matters a lot more than whether you follow rigid rules or eat just one “good” or “bad” food. Our colleague Aaron Carroll has published a list of [common-sense rules](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/21/upshot/simple-rules-for-healthy-eating.html) for healthful eating, which represents a good start.

We also asked our experts whether they considered their own diet healthful, and how they described it. Ninety-nine percent of nutritionists said their diet was very or somewhat healthy. The most popular special diet type was “Mediteranean”; 25 percent of our nutritionists picked it. But the most common answer, even for experts, was “no special rules or restrictions.”

**About this project**

We developed our list of foods in consultation with nutrition experts and Google search trends. Our public poll was conducted online by the Morning Consult and included 2,000 registered voters. You can read the full results [here](https://morningconsultintelligence.com/public/mc/160506_topline_NYT_v3_KD.pdf), with crosstabs [here](https://morningconsultintelligence.com/public/mc/160506_crosstabs_NYT_v3_KD.pdf). Our [survey of nutritionists](https://morningconsultintelligence.com/public/mc/160600_topline_NYT_v2_AP.pdf) was sent to the membership of the American Society for Nutrition, a professional group for nutritionists. Not every member completed the survey, but 672 nutritionists did. We view our expert survey not as a scientific measure of all nutritionists, but as a useful if imperfect measure of what foods professionals consider to be healthful.