



HACKS TO HABITS

**A BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH STUDY TO BOLSTER
FRUIT & VEGETABLE CONSUMPTION**

INSIGHTS REPORT

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**Understanding nutrition security and habits to close the
consumption gap**

By

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Fruits and vegetables are foundational to healthy eating so much so that their underconsumption impedes the ability to achieve greater diet quality among all Americans as well as greater nutrition security among those with fewer resources. Inflation has further exacerbated this issue — between June 2021 and June 2022, the cost to build a healthy dietary pattern increased by 12.5 percent.

It is business 101 to think of sales as “the bottom line.” Yet are sales the only or even the best metric of performance in the produce industry? Or is progress toward achieving recommended stomach share for fruits and vegetables a better metric? At the Produce for Better Health Foundation, we feel that increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables is not only the desired destination but will ultimately be the key to sustained and increased sales.

Hundreds of millions of cups of fruits and vegetables are left on (and off) the table every day

Here’s the rough math. More than eight in 10 Americans are not consuming recommended amounts of produce per day and frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption declined 10 percent between 2004 and 2020. Adults and children should be eating 2.5 and 2.3 cups more per day, respectively. Knowing that there are just over 330 million individuals living in the U.S., and adults comprise more than three-quarters of the population (approximately 258 million), we can approximate the number of cups of fruits and vegetables being “left on the table” every day. For those of you without a calculator handy, that is close to 700 million cups of fruits and vegetables per day.

Decades of PBH research indicate that, not only do consumers know that consuming fruits and vegetables is good for them, but the majority say they are “trying” to eat them more often. Still, real-life barriers to eating more exist (e.g., cost, spoilage, finding options that everyone in the family will eat).

From a food and nutrition security perspective, lower-income consumers report less belief in the health benefits of fruits and vegetables than with higher-incomes. Also, comparatively, they are more likely to report eating fruits and vegetables to manage illness and less likely to eat them because they are part of a balanced diet. Lower-income mothers, specifically, report less confidence in including more fruits and vegetables in meals and snacks each day, and lack support and peer role models, compared to their higher-income counterparts. As a collective industry, we can support consumers in building upon current habits and forming new ones. Understanding them is the first step; and our research provides promising avenues and learnings to help do just that.

Habit formation and solving the fruit and vegetable consumption crisis

As habit formation appears to be key in increasing consumption (read: sales), new PBH research, Hacks To Habits: A Behavioral Study To Bolster Fruit and Vegetable Consumption, indicates that there is more automaticity in fruit and vegetable shopping compared to automaticity in their

consumption. Automaticity is a proxy for the presence (or absence) of habits.

Encouraging and supporting consumers in retaining and building new fruit and vegetable consumption habits should be (and needs to be) all-hands-on-deck and the ultimate team sport. After all, people need to buy more fruits and vegetables if they are going to eat more of them.

September is National Fruits & Veggies Month and what better time than now to engage with consumers and encourage them to Have A Plant — every time they eat.

Here are some turnkey, research-based strategies for food and nutrition communicators and marketers as well as the collective industry to encourage individuals and families to Have A Plant:

1. Help your audience build upon existing routines versus implementing a new behavior. For example, match a fruit or vegetable with foods they are commonly consumed with (e.g., cereal for fruit or salads and sandwiches for vegetables).
2. Support consumers with easy skill-building and simple recipes to facilitate rewarding feelings as well as delicious and desirable eating experiences, recognizing taste and enjoyment in the short term and pride in the long term.
3. Share fruit and vegetable hacks that make consumption easy and rewarding (e.g., prepping shortcuts, doubling amounts in recipes, easy and flavorful seasoning approaches, storage tips, adding to an existing meal routine).
4. Promote habits throughout the consumption journey — planning, shopping, storing, preparing, and consuming — by increasing knowledge of “hacks” and how to implement them at each step in the consumption journey.
5. Habits result largely from consistently repeating behaviors that are easy and rewarding — this should be the basis for designing hacks for each step of the consumption journey. If there’s a breakdown, it’s important to understand and address where and why!

At a time when Americans are facing a chronic consumption crisis, National Fruits & Veggies Month is a great platform to promote fruits and vegetables and connect with consumers as well as understand them, meet them where they are and by all means help them, Have A Plant.

For more information on PBH research, tips, tricks and insights from PBH experts, advisors and Have A Plant Ambassadors, visit www.fruitsandveggies.org.

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