New American Revolution

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Take a look in almost any shopping bag -- paper or plastic -- and you'll see signs that the American diet is changing ... for the better. More than ever, concerns about health and nutrition are influencing what foods people buy and how they prepare them.

"There was a time when consumers bought products based mainly on taste, convenience, price and even how much they liked the package," says Dr. Mark A. Kantor, a nutrition specialist with the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service. "But I think it's safe to say that times have changed. The 1980s may well be remembered as the decade that began the great nutrition revolution -- a time when consumers began to make food choices and plan their meals with nutrition in mind."

That's not to say that taste isn't important; it is. But nutrition is catching up. In its 1988 "Trends" survey, the Food Marketing Institute (FMI), a national trade association representing supermarket companies, reported that taste was "very important" to nearly nine out of ten shoppers (88 percent), followed by product safety, which was very important to 83 percent of shoppers. Seven out of ten (72 percent) shoppers said nutrition was very important, ranking it above price, storability and ease of preparation. And when shoppers who thought nutrition was "somewhat important" were taken into account, nutrition tied with taste and safety (at 98 percent) as a factor that influences purchase decisions.

More than two-thirds of the shoppers surveyed by FMI said they frequently select foods to balance their families' diet and serve nutritional snacks, such as fruits and vegetables.

"These findings suggest that for almost all shoppers, nutrition plays a major role in the selection of food items," notes Kantor.

Changes in shopping behavior have been matched by changes in the kitchen. Two-thirds (67 percent) of the shoppers questioned for FMI's "Trends" report, for example, say they cook or prepare foods differently than they did three to five years ago. They use less salt and sugar (40 and 17 per-

cent, respectively), eat more vegetables and fresh foods (20 percent) and less red meat (15 percent). These figures represent an increase of at least eight percentage points in each category since last year.

Based on a national telephone survey of some 1,000 adult shoppers, FMI's survey results are similar to those revealed in polls conducted to evaluate federal public health programs. Called "Health and Diet Surveys," these polls are based on telephone interviews with some 4,000 consumers nationwide.

Their most recent results indicate that 61 percent of Americans have made major diet changes during the past two years, specifically to reduce their risks of cancer and heart disease.

Efforts to reduce fat intake -especially by cutting down on red
meat -- predominate, followed by
attempts to cut back on salt, sugar
and cholesterol. Consumers interviewed for the federal surveys
also reported eating more fish,
poultry, fresh produce and bran or
whole-grain products.

Kantor isn't surprised.

"Since the early 1970s, per capita consumption of fresh vegetables has increased more than 20 pecent -- from 75 pounds a year to more than 90 pounds today," he says. "Fresh fruit consumption has increased more than 13 percent, with each American now eating more than 210 pounds a year."

If you extend the dietary comparison to 1965, the differences are even more dramatic. We're eating 34 percent more fish, 120 percent more pasta products, 198 percent more low-fat milk and yogurt and a whopping 767 percent more broccoli.

Many of these changes can be attributed to advertising, increased media attention and public information campaigns.

"Consumers are literally being bombarded with messages about nutrition," says Kantor. "Even a casual television viewer like me can't help but notice all the commercials that emphasize nutrition. And have you noticed there seem to be more and more popular magazines dealing with nutrition, health and fitness appearing on the newsstands?"

Paralleling consumers'

increased awareness of the diethealth link is a growing interest in food quality and safety. Threefourths of consumers consider pesticide and herbicide residues to be a "serious hazard," and an additional 20 percent deem them "something of a hazard," according to the 1988 "Trends" survey. Their No. 2 concern is antibiotics and hormones in poultry and livestock, considered a serious hazard by six out of ten shoppers (61 percent) and something of a hazard by three out of ten (28 percent).

"Most experts feel these substances pose relatively little risk to consumers," notes Kantor. "The real problems are disease-causing bacteria that multiply and are spread through improper handling, preparation and storage.

"Nevertheless, survey results send a clear message to the food industry. We must continue our efforts to develop safer pesticides and herbicides while helping consumers to understand the benefits

of various agricultural practices and techniques."

And what better time to focus on such issues than National Agriculture Week. Designed to celebrate and focus attention on an industry that affects all of us, the event is sponsored in Maryland by Maryland Agriculture Week, Inc., the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service and the Maryland Department of Agriculture.



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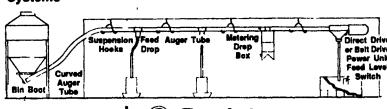




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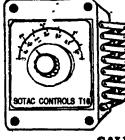
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