



# 2019 AARP BRAIN HEALTH AND DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS SURVEY

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June 2019



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## KEY FINDINGS



# Key Findings

*Millions of adults age 18 and older take vitamins or dietary supplements for a variety of different reasons. The oldest generations of adults tend to take supplements at a higher rate than younger generations and a subset of these adults take supplements to maintain or improve their brain health or delay or reverse dementia. According to the Global Council on Brain Health (GCBH) in the document entitled “The Real Deal on Brain Health Supplements,” there is little evidence to suggest that vitamins and dietary supplements are beneficial to brain health.<sup>1</sup>*

**More older adults take supplements.** Three-quarters of the Silent and Greatest generations currently take a vitamin or dietary supplement compared to fewer than six in 10 of all adults age 18 and older.

**The top concerns** about vitamins and dietary supplements **include the effectiveness, safety, and purity of the ingredients.**

**Many adults mistakenly believe that the safety and effectiveness of vitamins and dietary supplements are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) before they can be sold.** In fact, the FDA can only challenge the safety and effectiveness of these products after they reach the marketplace.



<sup>1</sup> Global Council on Brain Health (2019). “The Real Deal on Brain Health Supplements: GCBH Recommendations on Vitamins, Minerals and Other Dietary Supplements.” Available at [GlobalCouncilOnBrainHealth.org](https://doi.org/10.26419/pia.00094.001); DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26419/pia.00094.001>

# Key Findings (cont.)

**Self-reported brain health is no different for those who take any type of supplements** now, took them in the past, or have never taken them.

**Over one-third of adults in the Silent or Greatest generation currently take a supplement under the false assumption it will reverse or prevent dementia or maintain or improve brain health** compared to less than one-quarter of all adults age 18 and older.

**Adults who have never taken a supplement for a brain-related reason are more likely to say their brain health is excellent or very good** compared to those who took a supplement in the past.

**Healthy eating is a key driver in self-reported brain health.** Adults age 18 and older who eat the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables<sup>2</sup> report better brain health regardless of whether or not they take supplements. Furthermore, those who meet these dietary guidelines also engage in other healthy habits.



<sup>2</sup> From: <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/> (Amount varies by age and gender)





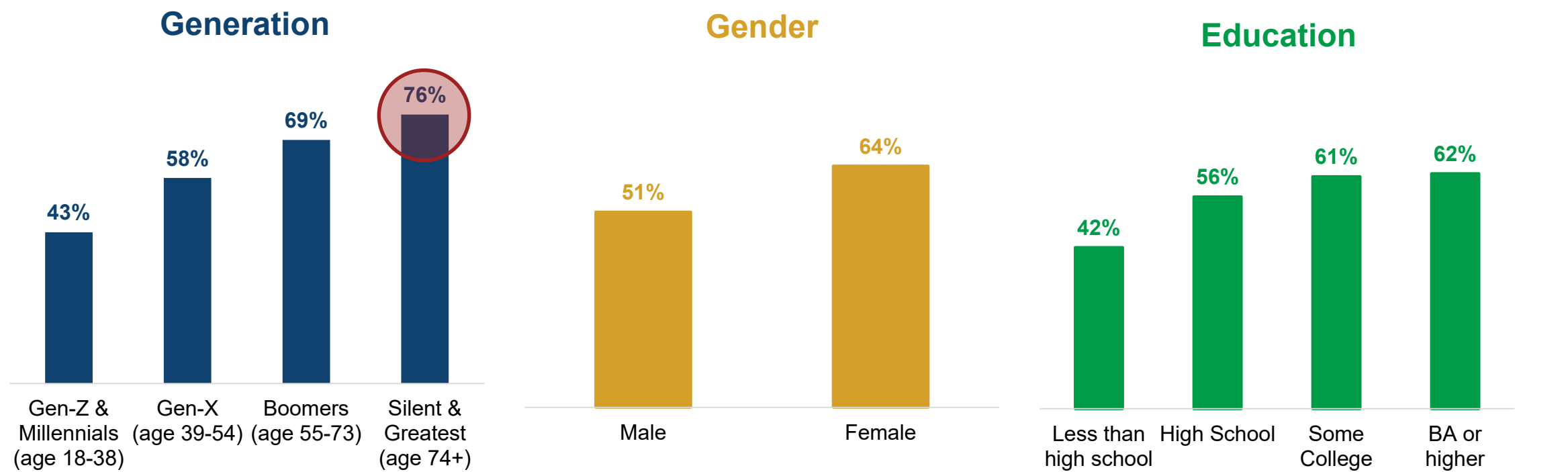
# ATTITUDES AND USE OF SUPPLEMENTS



# Supplement use is higher among women, adults 55 and older, and those with higher levels of education

Boomers and members of the Silent/Greatest generations (about 66 million people<sup>3</sup> age 55 and older) currently take supplements at a higher rate than younger generations as do more women and those with a higher level of education. No differences were noted by race/ethnicity.

Percent who currently take vitamins or dietary supplements, by generation, gender, and education



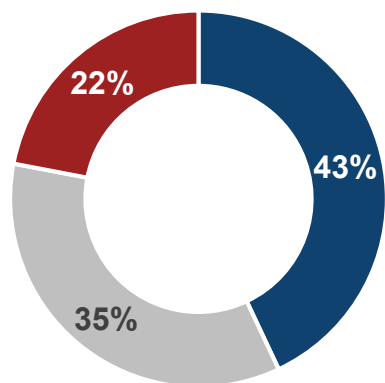
Q6: Have you ever taken vitamins or dietary supplements? Yes, in the past; Yes, and I currently am; No

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: April 2018. Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 2010 through July 2017.

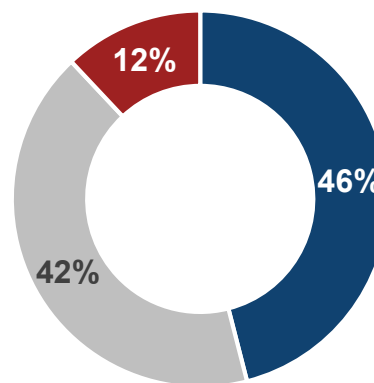
# Majority see supplements positively

Large majorities of adults age 18 and older view vitamins and supplements positively. A majority currently take supplements and very few have never taken them.

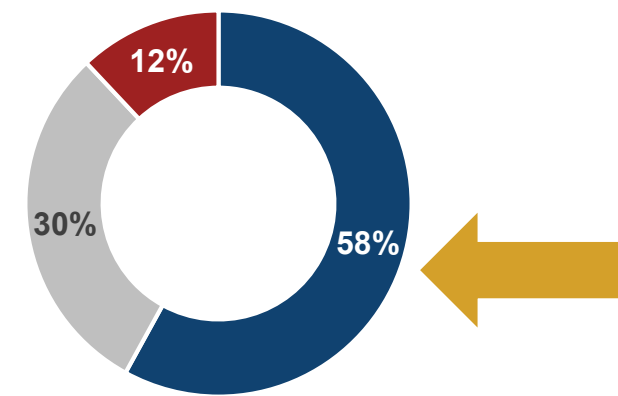
**Importance\* of supplements to health**



**Usefulness of supplements to health**



**Have you ever taken supplements**



■ Extremely/very ■ Somewhat ■ Not very/not at all

■ Extremely/very ■ Somewhat ■ Not very/not at all

■ Yes, currently ■ Yes, in the past ■ No

*\*81% of adults age 50 and older say that taking vitamins or dietary supplement is at least somewhat important to health.*

*Q3: How important do you feel each of the following activities are to your health? [Taking vitamins or dietary supplements] Extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not very important, not at all important]*

*Q4: In general, how useful are vitamins or dietary supplements to health? Extremely useful, very useful, somewhat useful, not very useful, not at all useful*

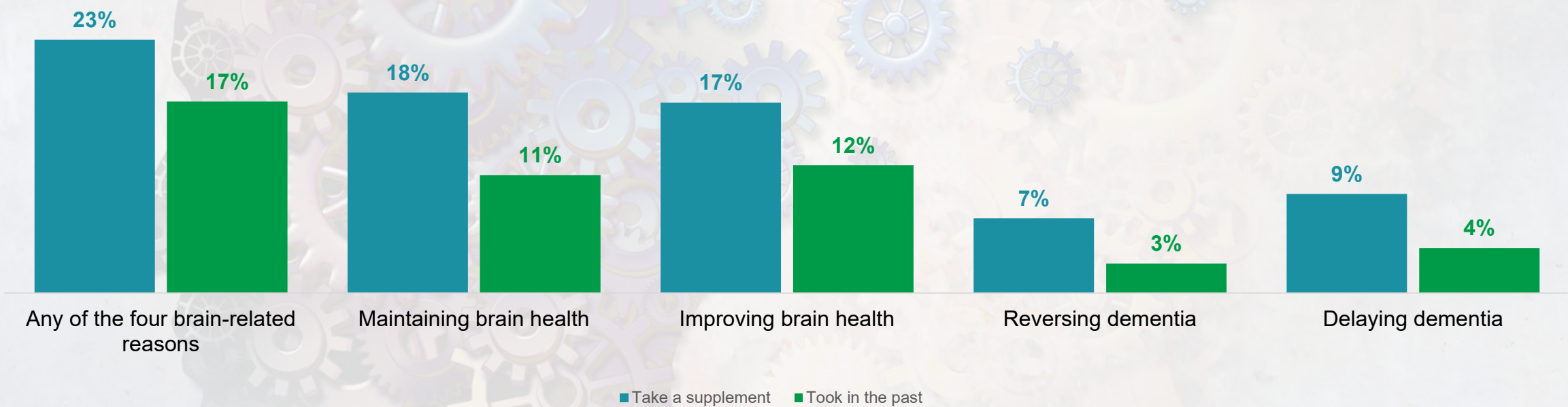
*Q6: Have you ever taken vitamins or dietary supplements? Yes, in the past,; Yes, and I currently am; No*



# Some currently take or have taken a supplement for their brain health

Overall, nearly one-quarter (23%) of adults age 18 and older currently take a supplement to maintain or improve brain health or delay or reverse dementia.

Percent who currently take or previously took a vitamin or dietary supplement for each brain-related issue



Q8: Please indicate whether or not you have taken vitamins or dietary supplements for the following reasons ... No, never; Yes, currently taking; Yes, took in the past

# Older adults are more likely to take supplements for brain health

With age, supplement use for brain health increases. More than one-third of the oldest generations take a supplement for any one of the four brain-related reasons mentioned. This represents approximately 8.5 million people age 74 and older, 30 million age 50 and older, and 58 million age 18 and older<sup>4</sup>.

Reasons for supplement use	Overall	Adults age 50 and older	Percent who currently take supplements for each reason, by generation			
			Gen-Z & Millennials (age 18-38)	Gen-X (age 39-54)	Baby Boomers (age 55-73)	Silent & Greatest (age 74 and older)
Maintaining brain health or mental sharpness	18%	21%	15%	17%	20%	28%
Improving brain health or mental sharpness	17%	20%	13%	18%	20%	25%
Reversing dementia*	7%	8%	5%	6%	7%	13%
Delaying dementia	9%	11%	6%	10%	10%	17%
For any reason (above)	23%	26%	20%	23%	25%	36%

*\*There is no evidence to suggest that dietary supplements reverse or delay dementia.* Global Council on Brain Health (2019). "The Real Deal on Brain Health Supplements: GCBH Recommendations on Vitamins, Minerals and Other Dietary Supplements." Available at [GlobalCouncilOnBrainHealth.org](https://doi.org/10.26419/pia.00094.001); DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26419/pia.00094.001>

Q8: Please indicate whether or not you have taken vitamins or dietary supplements for the following reasons ... No, never; Yes, currently taking; Yes, took in the past

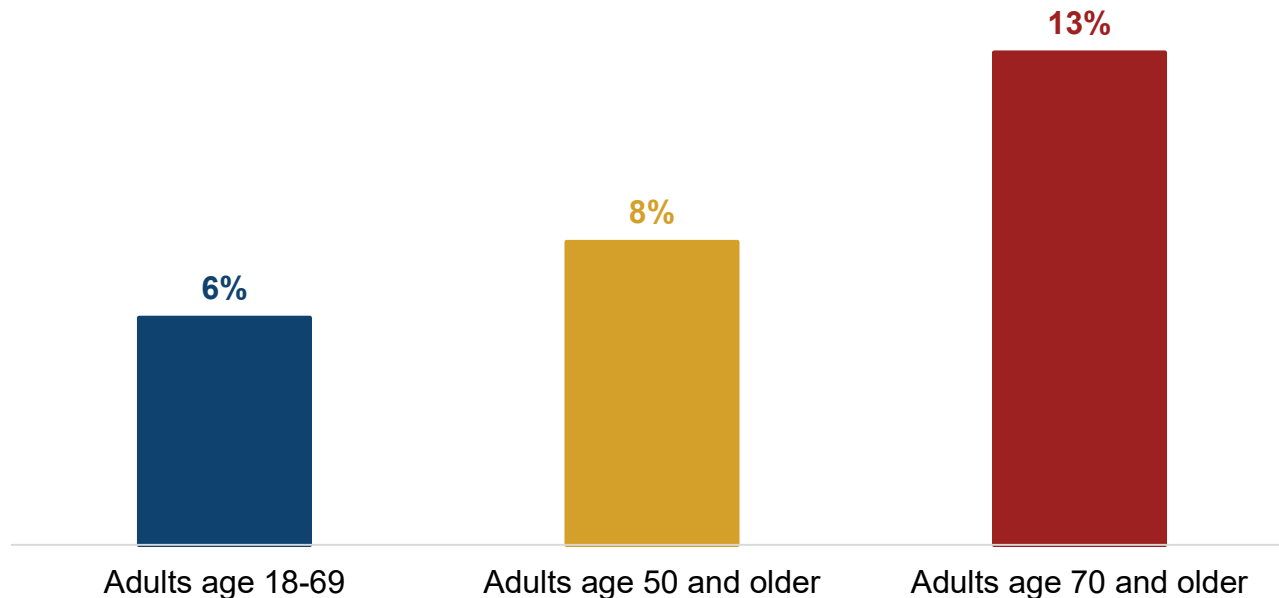
<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: April 2018. Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 2010 through July 2017.



# Significantly more adults age 70 and older take a supplement to reverse dementia compared to adults up to age 69

There is no evidence that any supplement is effective in the reversal of dementia yet more than one in 10 adults age 70 and older currently take a supplement to do just that. This represents nearly 4.5 million adults<sup>5</sup>.

## Percent who currently take a supplement to reverse dementia, by selected age groups

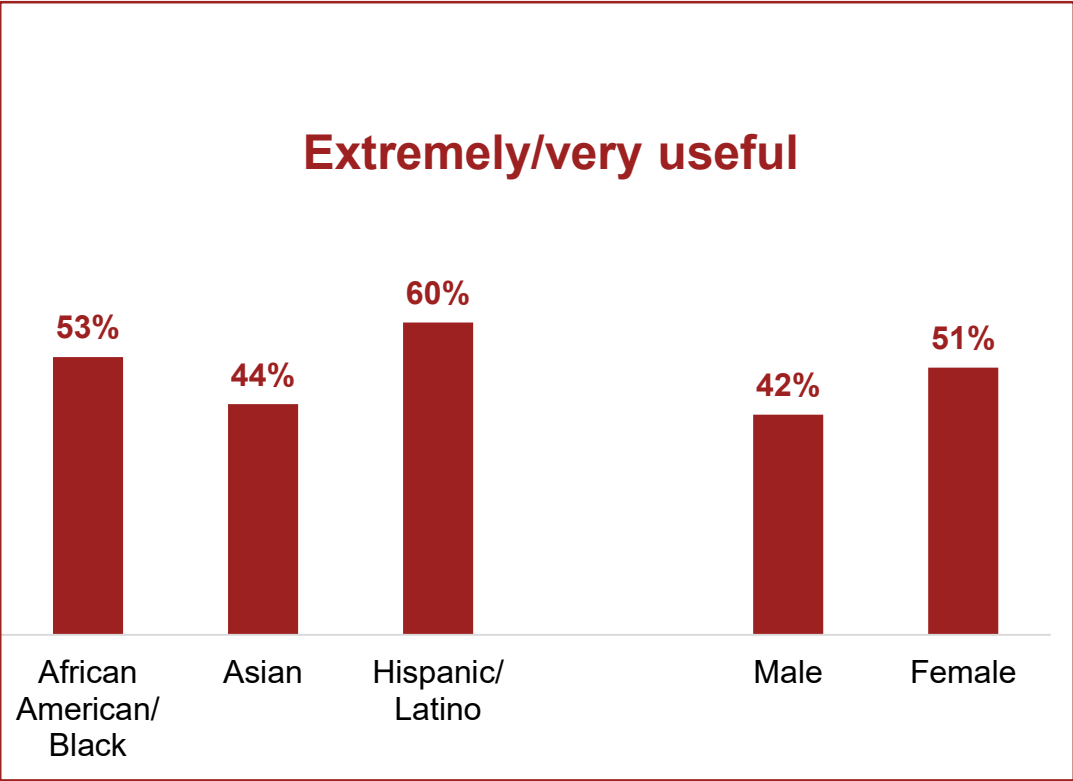
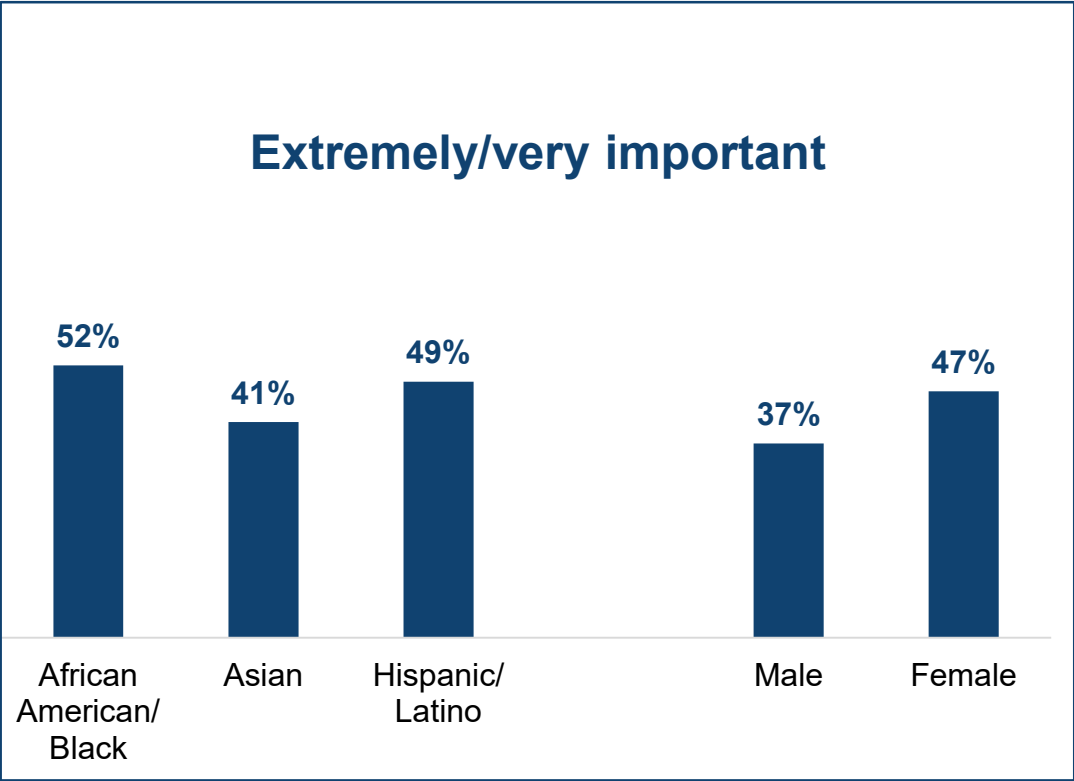


Q8: Please indicate whether or not you have taken vitamins or dietary supplements for the following reasons: Reversing dementia ... No, never; Yes, currently taking; Yes, took in the past

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: April 2018. Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 2010 through July 2017.

# Dietary supplements' relationship to health is rated higher by some groups

Significantly more women than men said supplements are extremely or very important and extremely or very useful. Compared to the general population, significantly more African American/Black adults and Hispanic/Latino adults rated supplements high in importance and usefulness.



Q3: How important do you feel each of the following activities are to your health? [Taking vitamins or dietary supplements] Extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not very important, not at all important]

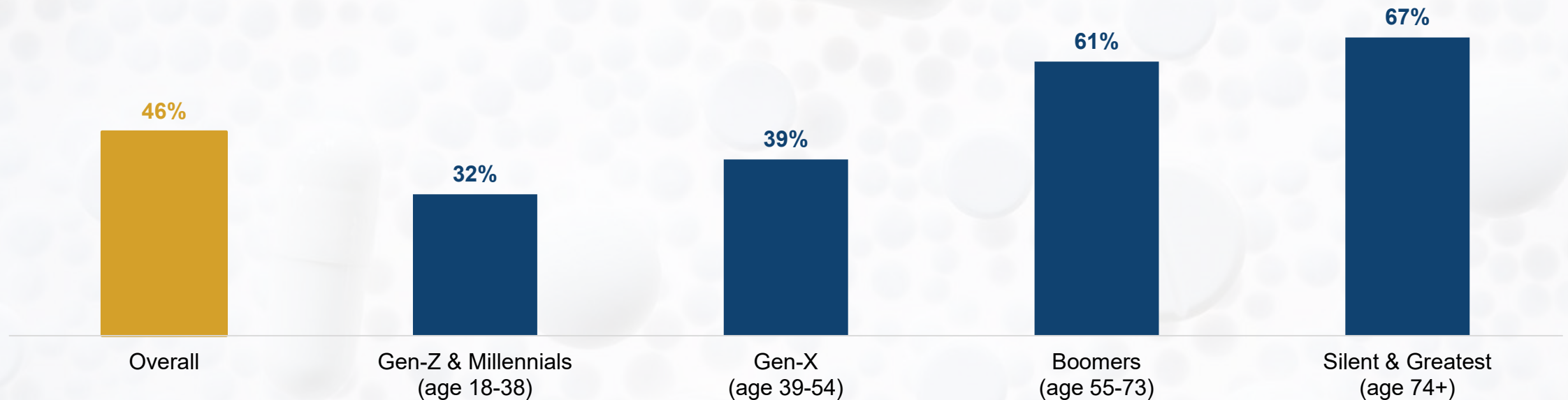
Q4: In general, how useful are vitamins or dietary supplements to health? Extremely useful, very useful, somewhat useful, not very useful, not at all useful



# Older generations take vitamins or dietary supplements often

When asked how frequently they took vitamins or dietary supplements in the previous week, more Boomers and members of the Silent/Greatest generations took them 5-7 days per week compared to younger generations.

Percent who took vitamins or dietary supplements 5-7 days in the previous week\*, by generation



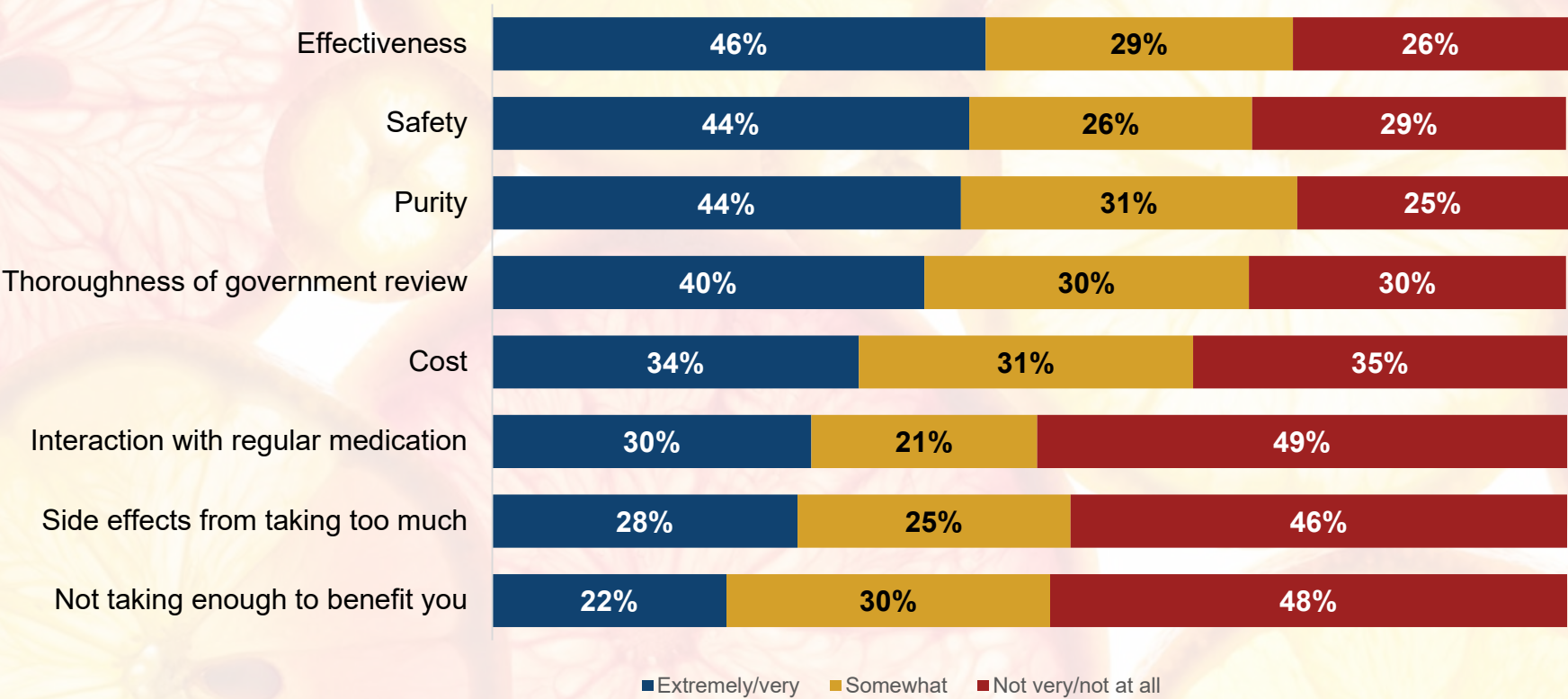
\* 69% of adults age 50 and older took a vitamin or dietary supplement at least three days in the prior week.

Q11: Below is a list of ways you might have felt or behaved. Please tell me how often you engaged in these activities during the past week. I took vitamins or dietary supplements. Never, Rarely (less than 1 day), Some or a little of the time (1-2 days), occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days), Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

# The effectiveness of the ingredients is the top concern about supplements

The safety and purity of the ingredients are the other top concerns among adults age 18 and older related to vitamins or dietary supplements.

Level of concern about each aspect of vitamins or dietary supplements



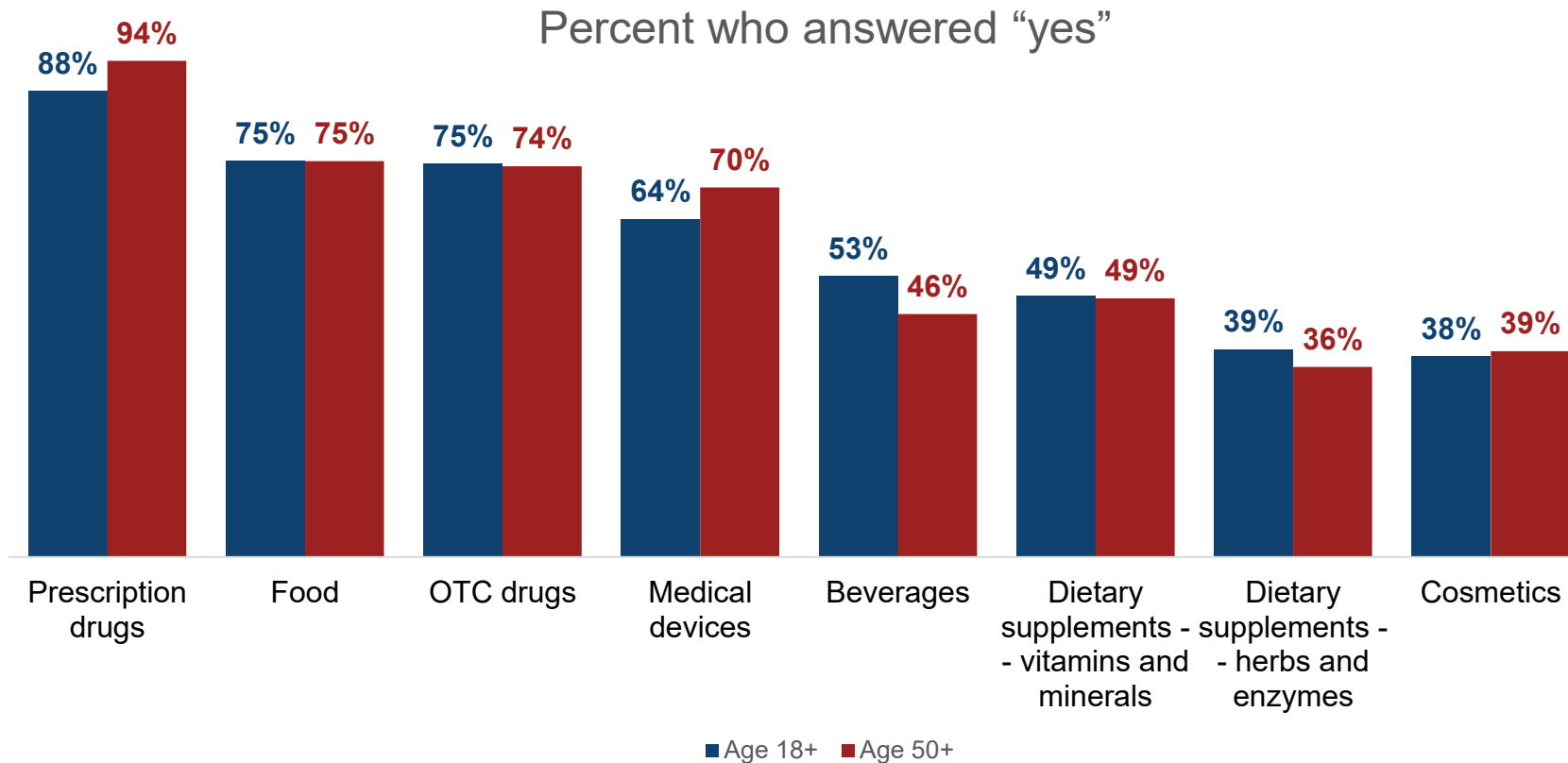
Similar to adults overall, a majority of adults age 50 and older are concerned about the purity (76%), effectiveness (76%), and safety (71%) of the ingredients, along with the thoroughness of the government review (73%).

Q10: Please indicate how concerned, if at all, you are about each of the following as it relates to vitamins or dietary supplements. Extremely concerned, Very concerned, Somewhat concerned, Not very concerned, Not at all concerned



# Many mistakenly believe the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates dietary supplements before they are sold

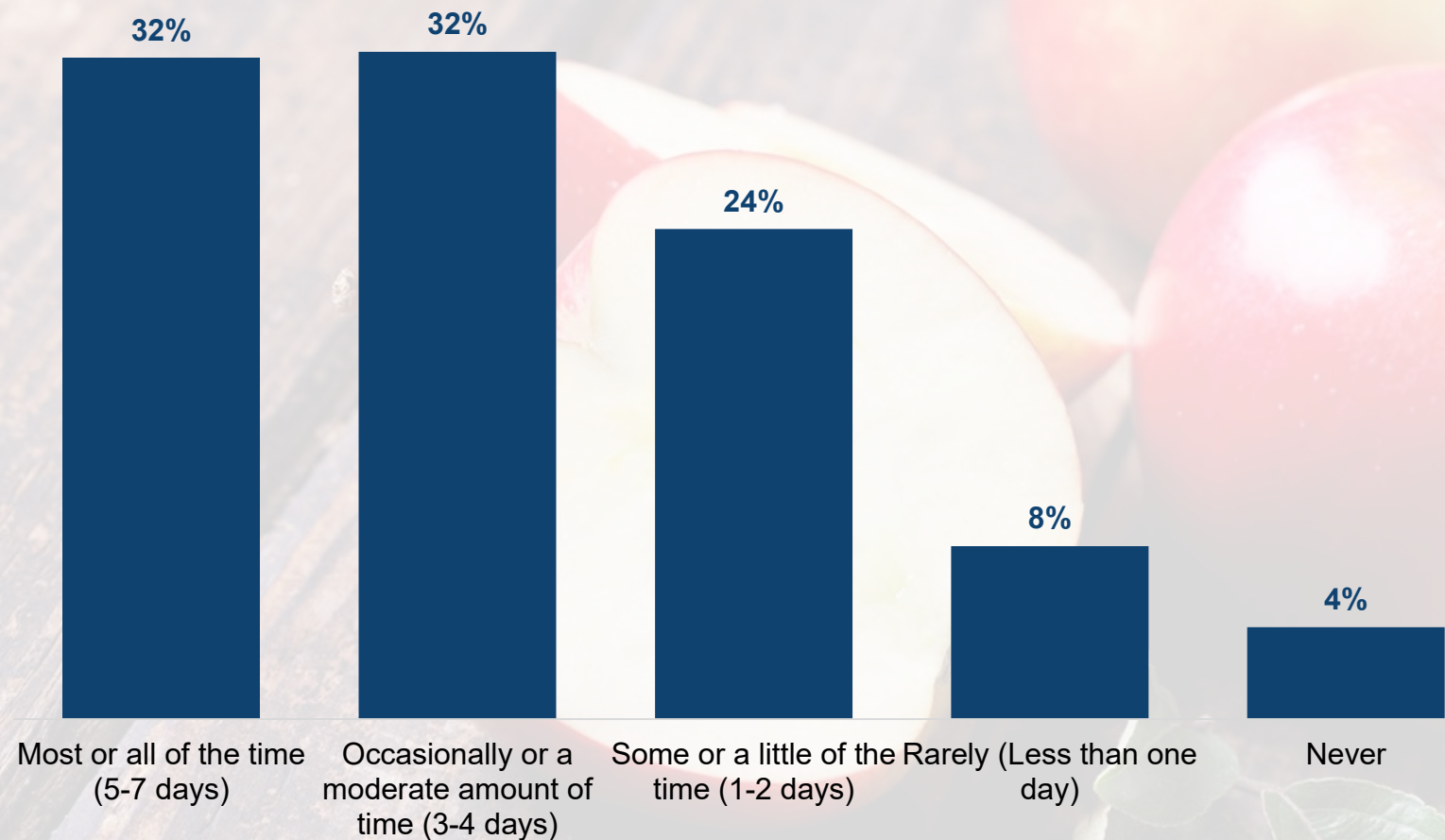
Many adults age 18 and older believe the FDA regulates dietary supplements for pre-market safety and effectiveness. The FDA does not require safety and effectiveness to be proven before dietary supplements can be sold.



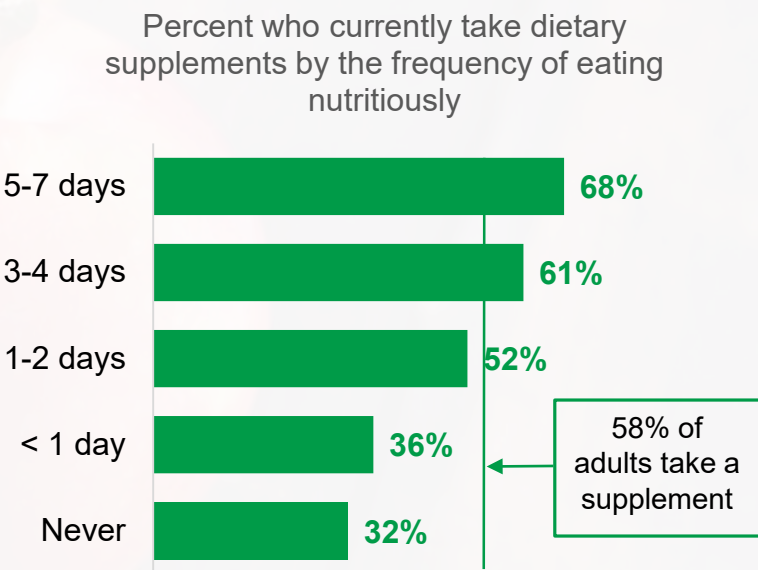
Q33: The Food and Drug (FDA) is responsible for regulating certain products used by consumers before they can be sold. To the best of your knowledge, which of the following types of products must be determined by the FDA to be safe and effective before they are sold? No, Yes, regulates

# Adults who generally eat well are more likely to take supplements

Frequency of eating nutritious and well-balanced meals



Adults age 18 and older who eat nutritious meals more often are significantly more likely to also take a vitamin or dietary supplement.



Q11: Below is a list of ways you might have felt or behaved. Please tell me how often you engaged in these activities during the past week. [I ate nutritious and well-balanced meals] Never, rarely (less than 1 day), some or a little of the time (1-2 days), occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days), most or all of the time (5-7 days)





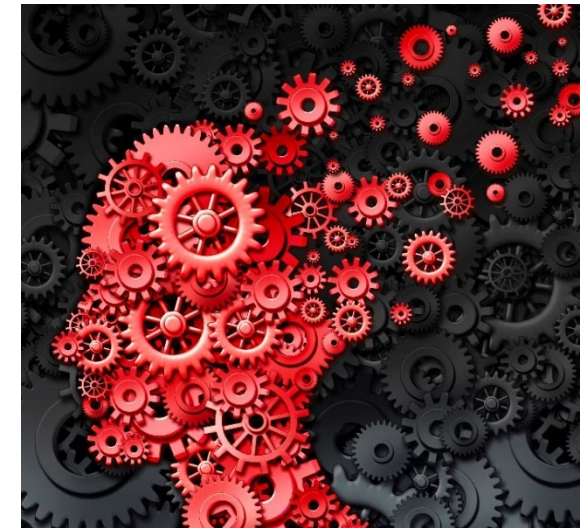
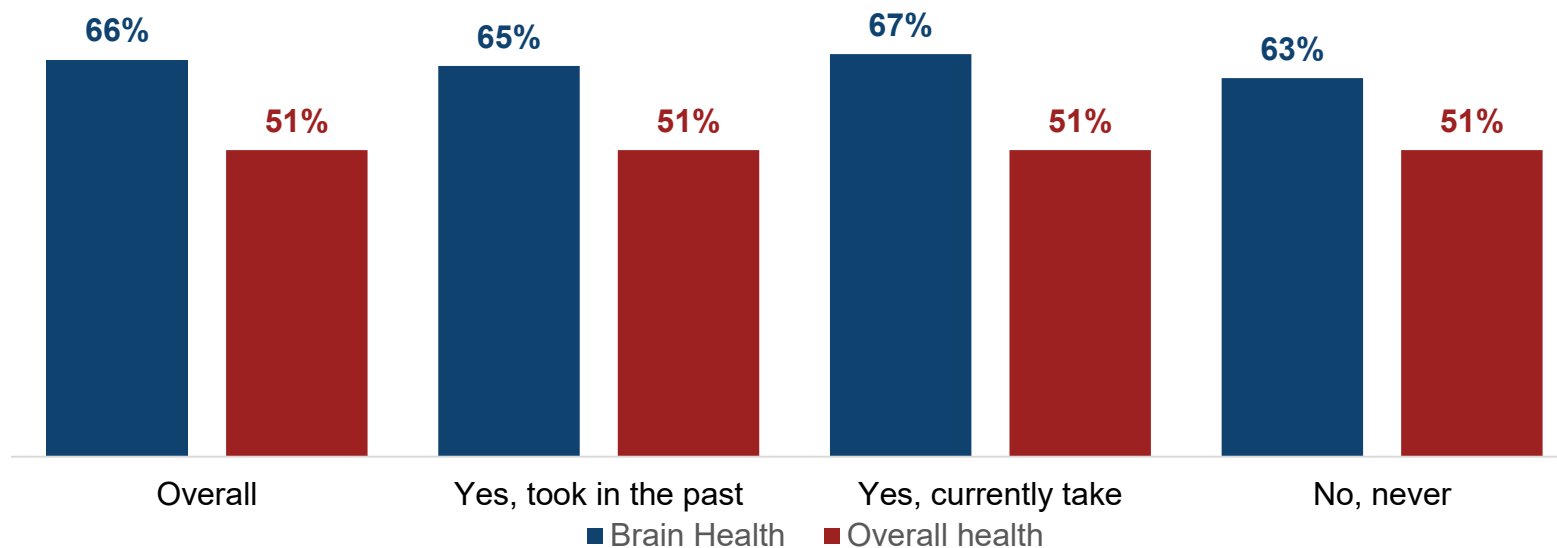
# SUPPLEMENTS AND BRAIN HEALTH



# Current or past supplement users do not report significantly better overall health or brain health

Most adults age 18 and older report their brain health as excellent or very good. There are no significant differences in self-reported brain health by supplement use history. Overall and by historical vitamin or dietary supplement use, about half rate their overall health as excellent or very good. This suggests that in general terms, current or past use of supplements is not related to self-reported brain or overall health.

Percent who rate their brain health and overall health as excellent or very good by “have you ever taken vitamins or dietary supplements”



Q2: How would you describe your overall health at this point in time? Would you say it is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?

Q5: How would you describe each of the following at this point in time? Would you say it is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor? [Your brain health or mental sharpness]

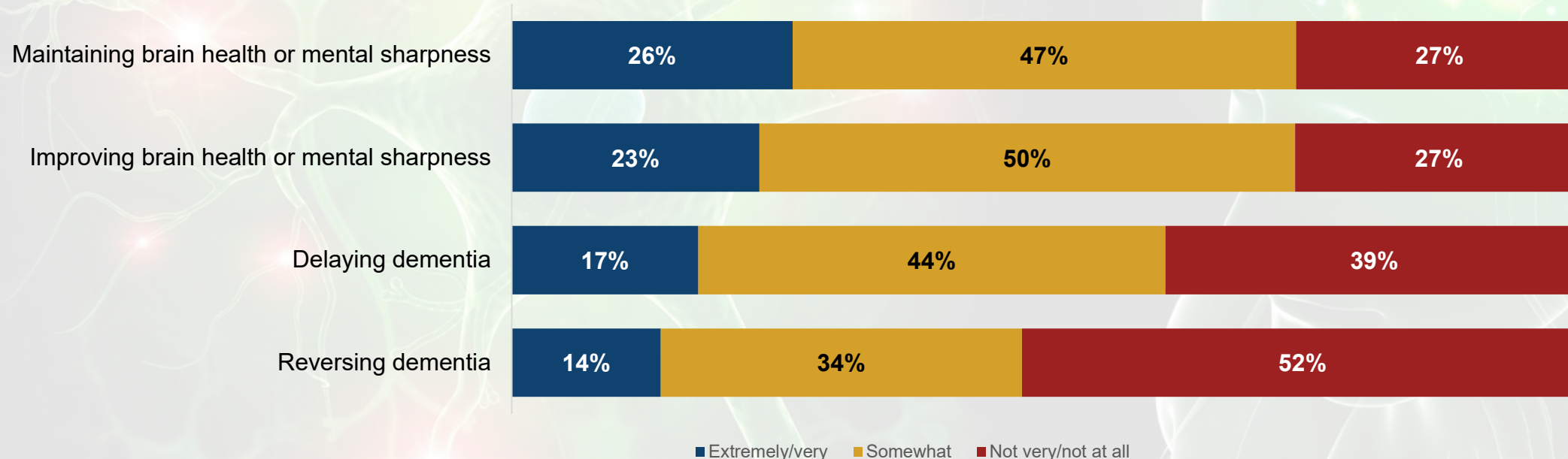
Q6: Have you ever taken vitamins or dietary supplements? Vitamins or dietary supplements can be taken in pills, capsules, liquids, gummies, or powders. Yes, in the past; Yes, and I currently am; No



# Many believe supplements are effective for brain health

Large majorities of adults age 18 and older believe vitamins or dietary supplements are at least somewhat effective in maintaining or improving brain health or mental sharpness and nearly half feel supplements are at least somewhat effective in reversing dementia.

## Perceived effectiveness of vitamins or dietary supplements for each brain-related issue

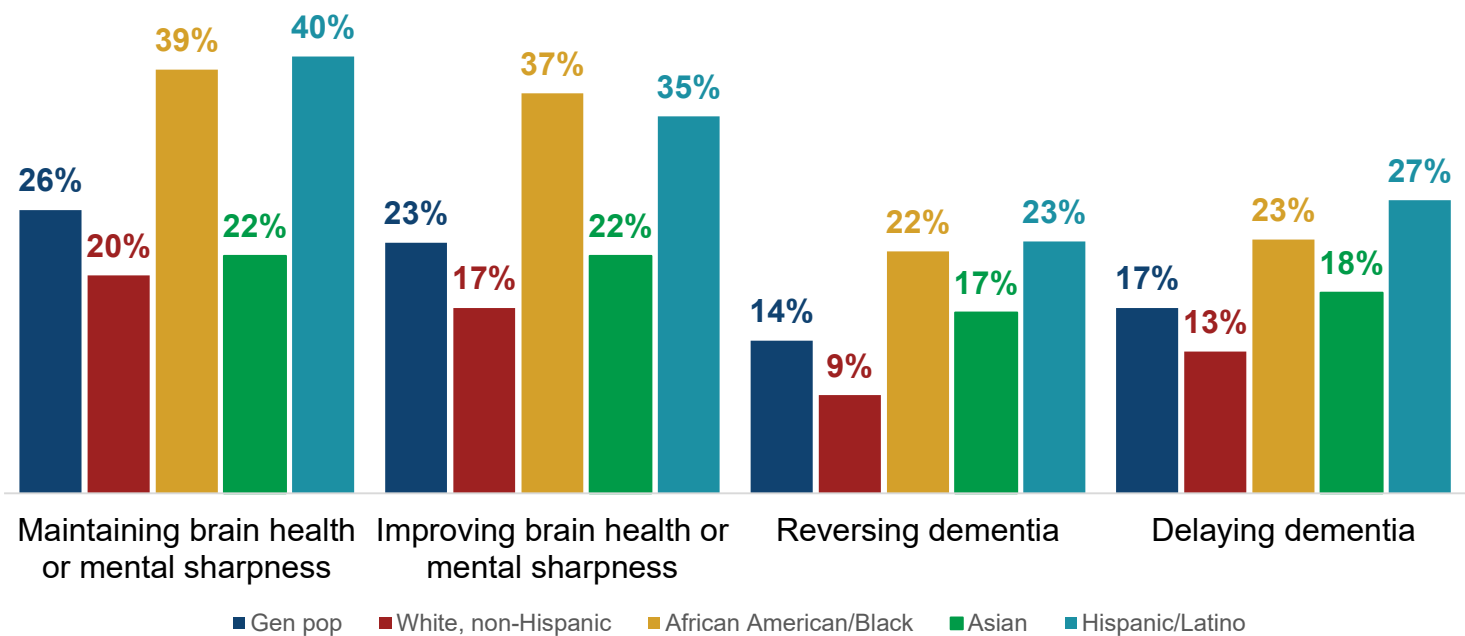


Q8: Please indicate whether or not you have taken vitamins or dietary supplements for the following reasons ... No, never; Yes, currently taking; Yes, took in the past

# Some racial and ethnic groups are more likely to believe that supplements are effective

African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino adults age 18 and older are more likely than non-Hispanic white adults and adults overall to believe vitamins or dietary supplements are extremely or very effective in maintaining or improving brain health or mental sharpness. However, they are not more likely to take supplements compared to adults overall.

Percent who say taking vitamins or dietary supplements is extremely or very effective by race/ethnicity



Q7: How effective do you think taking vitamins or dietary supplements are at...extremely effective, very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, not at all effective.



# Adults who take supplements for brain health believe they are effective

Perceived effectiveness of supplements for the following:	Overall	Percent who said supplements were extremely or very effective by whether or not they take supplement for each of the following reasons		
		No, never	Yes, currently	Yes, in the past
Maintaining brain health or mental sharpness	26%	17%	56%	35%
Improving brain health or mental sharpness	23%	15%	51%	33%
Reversing dementia	14%	10%	53%	55%
Delaying dementia	17%	13%	53%	35%

Q7: How effective do you think taking vitamins or dietary supplements are at...extremely effective, very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, not at all effective.

Q8: Please indicate whether or not you have taken vitamins or dietary supplements for the following reasons ... No, never; Yes, currently taking; Yes, took in the past

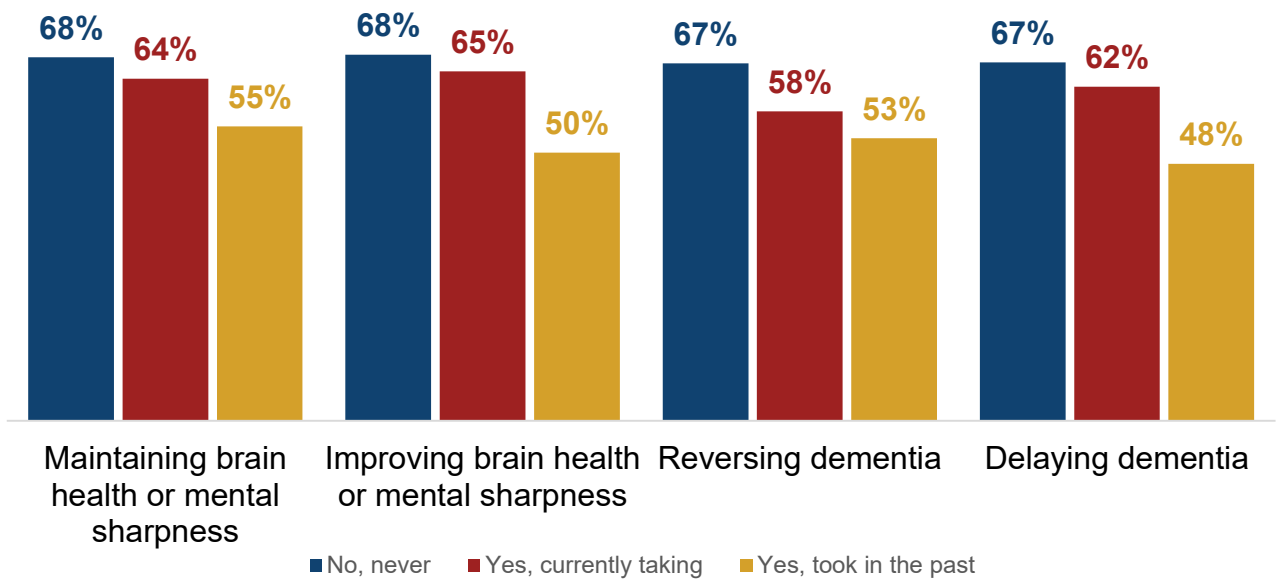
Adults age 18 and older who currently take a supplement for brain health or mental sharpness or have taken one in the past, are significantly more likely to believe the supplement is extremely or very effective. Relatively few adults who have never taken a supplement for these reasons see them as effective.



# Adults who have never taken a supplement for a reason related to brain health report better brain health

Adults age 18 and older who previously took a supplement for a brain-related issue are much less likely to say their brain health is excellent or very good.

Percent who rate their brain health excellent or very good by their use of supplements for each reason

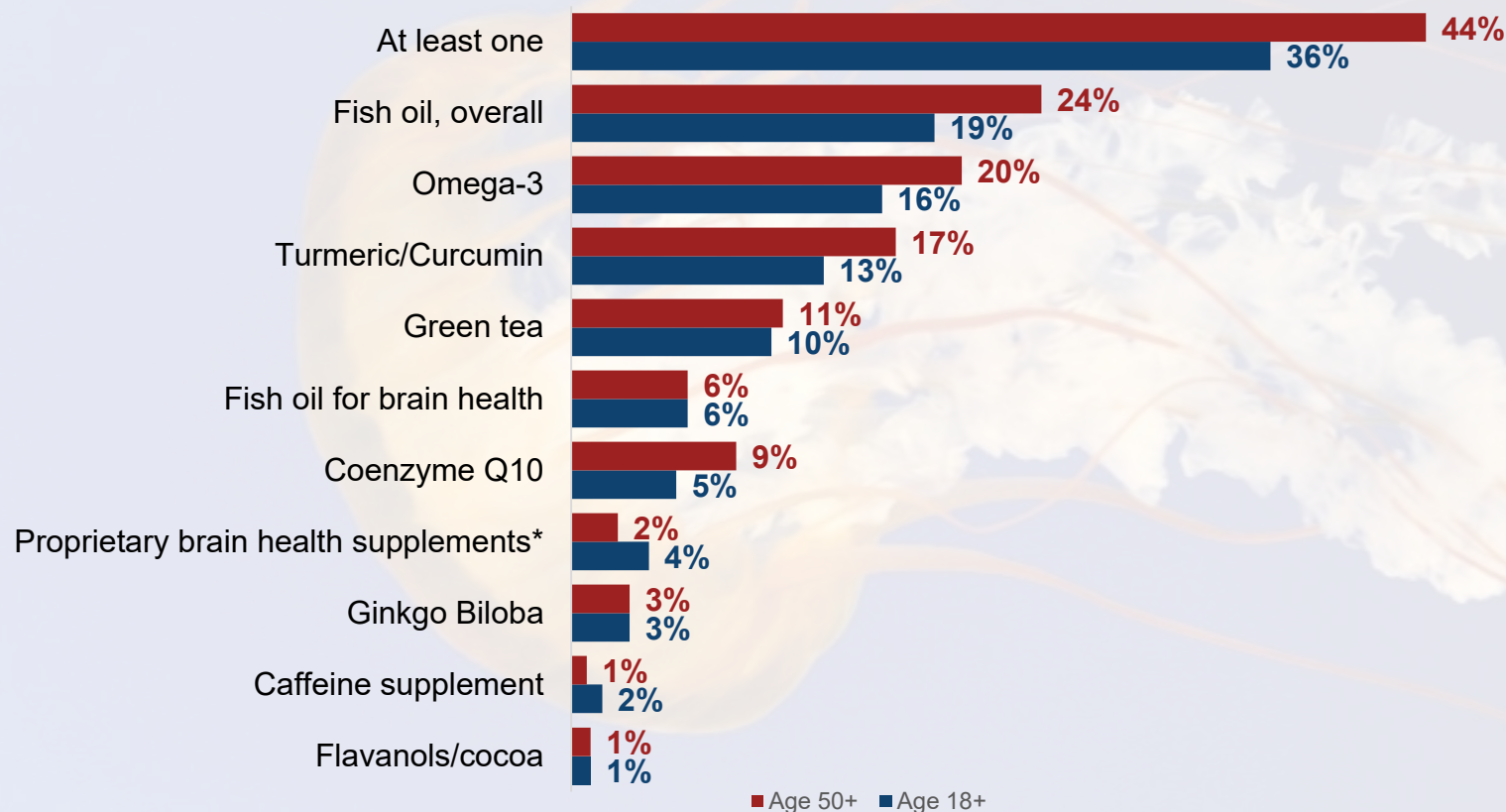


Q3: How would you describe each of the following at this point in time? Would you said it is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor [Your brain health or mental sharpness]  
Q8: Please indicate whether or not you have taken vitamins or dietary supplements for the following reasons ... No, never; Yes, currently taking; Yes, took in the past



# More than one-third take at least one brain-related supplement

Percent who use each type of brain-health related supplement



\*BriteSmart, Cognifen, Cognitex with Brain Shield, HeadStart, Neurofuzian, Neuro-PS, Mental Alertness, Lifeshield Mind Force, MindRise, Prevagen, Other

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: April 2018. Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 2010 through July 2017.

Overall, 36 percent of adults age 18 and older and 44 percent of adults age 50 and older take at least one of the brain-health related supplements listed here – about 90 million people<sup>4</sup> overall.

Among supplements often marketed for brain health, the most commonly used was Omega-3. Relatively few adults take proprietary supplements like Prevagen, which is said to be derived from jellyfish.

Although comparatively few adults age 18 and older take proprietary brain health supplements, the percent represents more than 10 million<sup>7</sup> adults.

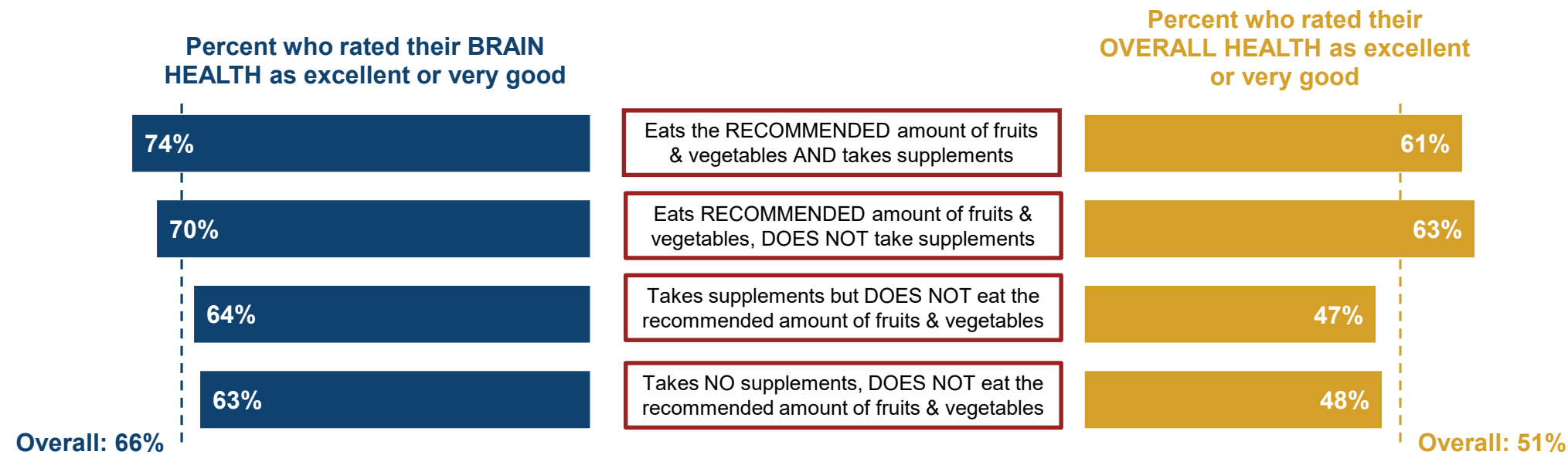
Q9: Please indicate which vitamins or dietary supplements you currently take [Check all that apply]

Q9b: Do you take fish oil for any of the following reasons? Heart health, Brain Health, Neither

# Adults who eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables<sup>6</sup> report better brain health

Adults age 18 and older who consume the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables each day are more likely to report their brain health and overall health as excellent or very good compared to those who do not, regardless of supplement use.

Percent who say their **brain health** and **overall health** are excellent or very good, by supplement use and eating the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables



<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/> (Amount varies by age and gender)





# IMPLICATIONS



# Implications

**Millions of adults currently take vitamins or dietary supplements.** Older adults take them at far higher rates than younger adults. Almost half of Americans incorrectly think that dietary supplements must be proven safe and effective before they are put on the market. Many are extremely or very concerned about the safety, the effectiveness, and purity of the ingredients.

**Almost one-quarter of adults overall (26 percent of adults age 50+) take at least one supplement for brain-health reasons.** That means that 58 million Americans (30 million age 50+) buy supplements believing it will help their brain health.<sup>8</sup> Nine million adults age 50+ (8%) are taking a dietary supplement thinking it will actually reverse dementia.

**Healthy eating and other healthy habits are beneficial to brain health.** Adults age 18 and older who consume the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables report better brain health than adults who do not, regardless of their supplement use. Meeting these dietary recommendations is related to engagement in other healthy behaviors. This suggests that **education about engagement in brain-healthy behaviors can potentially lead to maintaining or improving brain health.**



<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: April 2018. Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 2010 through July 2017.





# METHODOLOGY



# Methodology

- **Objectives:** The study examines U.S. adults' use and knowledge of vitamins and dietary supplements.
- **Methodology:** Online probability-based survey via Ipsos KnowledgePanel®.
- **Qualifications:** Age 18 and older
- **Sample:** Ipsos KnowledgePanel®, n=2,292. (Includes oversamples for African Americans/Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos, Asians, and adults age 70 and older).
- **Interviewing Dates:** January 29-February 7, 2019.
- **Weighting:** The data were weighted according to CPS benchmarks including gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, census region, income, home ownership, and metropolitan area.
- **Questionnaire length:** 18.1 minutes (median).
- **Confidence Interval:** Total sample:  $\pm 2.4$  percentage points.

For more information about this survey, please contact Laura Mehegan at [lmehegan@aarp.org](mailto:lmehegan@aarp.org).





# About AARP

AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation's largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org) or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.



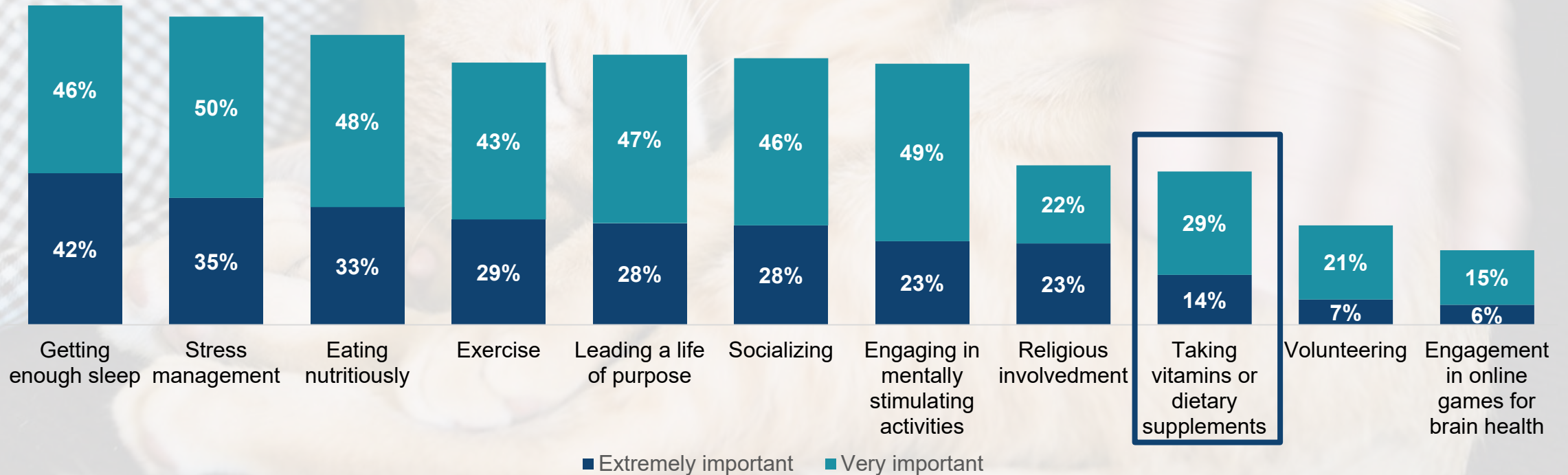


# APPENDIX



# Taking vitamins or dietary supplements viewed as less important to health than other activities

A large majority of adults age 18 and older feel that sleep, stress management, healthy eating, and exercise are the most important activities for health. Taking vitamins or nutritional supplements is close to the bottom of the list.

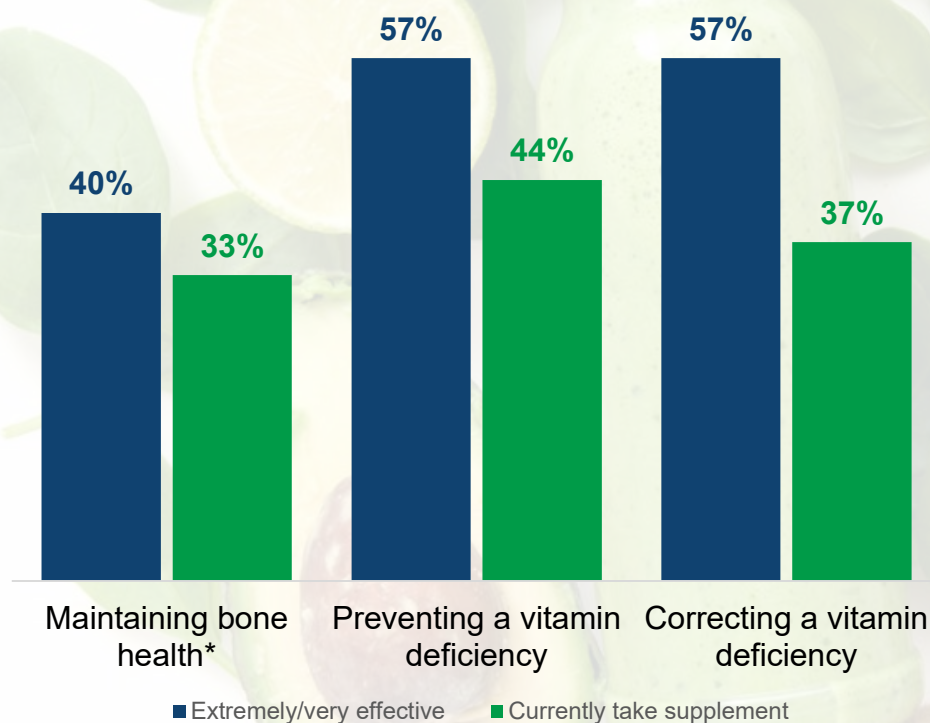


Q3: How important do you feel each of the following activities are to your health? [Taking vitamins or dietary supplements] Extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not very important, not at all important]

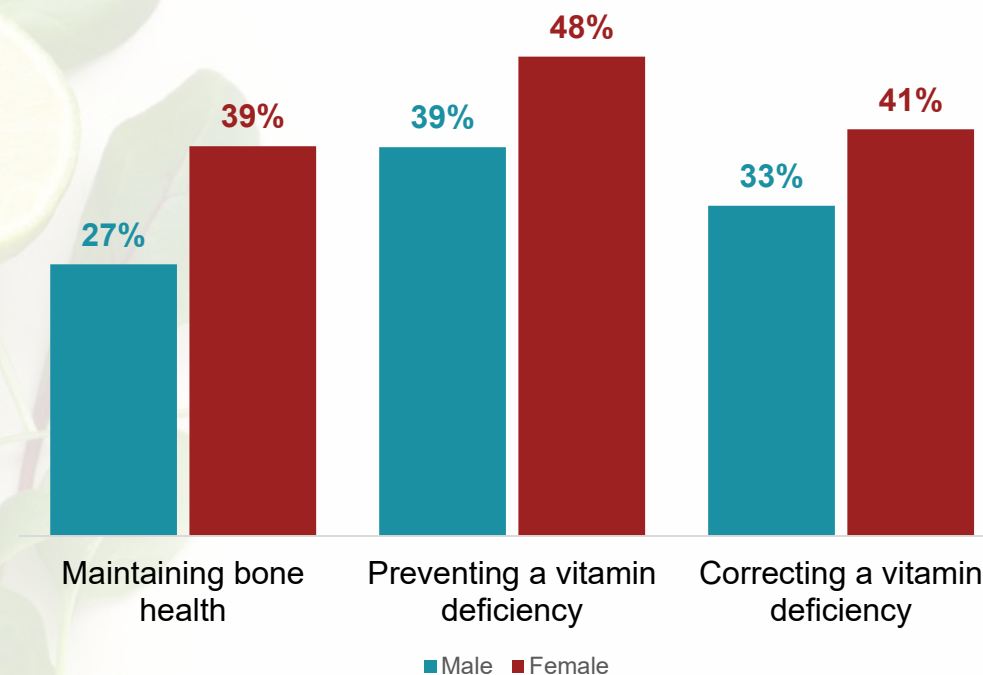
# Most believe vitamins are effective when it comes to a deficiency

Significantly more women than men take supplements for bone health and to prevent or correct a deficiency. With increasing age, significantly more adults take supplements for these same reasons.

Percent who said extremely or very effective and percent who currently take a supplement for each reason



Percent who currently take a supplement for each reason by gender



\*43% of adults age 50 and older currently take a supplement to maintain bone health.


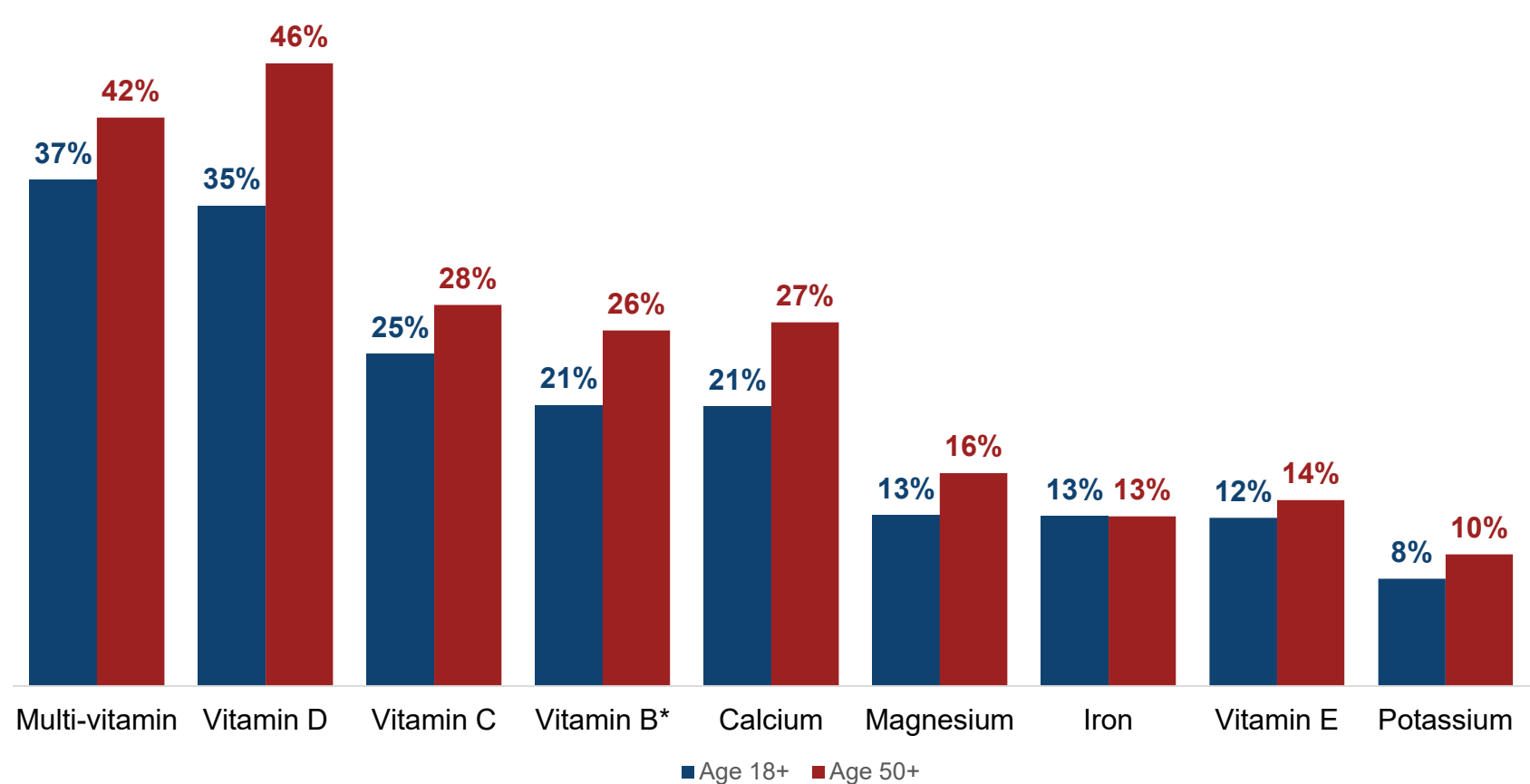
Q7: How effective do you think taking vitamins or dietary supplements are at...extremely effective, very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, not at all effective.

Q8: Please indicate whether or not you have taken vitamins or dietary supplements for the following reasons ... No, never; Yes, currently taking; Yes, took in the past



# The most commonly taken supplements are multi-vitamins and vitamin D

Two-thirds of adults age 18 and older take at least one of the vitamins listed.



Among adults age 50 and older who currently take a B vitamin, they currently take the following:

- ✓ B9 – 4%
- ✓ B12 – 48%
- ✓ B Complex – 62%

Q9: Please indicate which vitamins or dietary supplements you currently take. (Check all that apply)

# Vitamin use differs by certain demographic characteristics

Women and older adults are more likely to take certain vitamins. Compared to the general population, Asians are less likely to take some types of vitamins.

Significantly more women than men take...

- ☐ Multi-vitamins (41% vs. 34%)
- ☐ Vitamin D (41% vs. 29%)
- ☐ Vitamin B (24% vs. 18%)
- ☐ Calcium (26% vs. 14%)
- ☐ Iron (16% vs. 9%)

Significantly more adults from older generations\* than younger generations take...

- ☐ Vitamin D (51% vs. 22%)
- ☐ Vitamin B (35% vs. 14%)
- ☐ Calcium (30% vs. 12%)
- ☐ Magnesium (19% vs. 8%)

\*Silent/Greatest generation compared to Gen-Z/Millennials.

Significantly fewer Asians compared to the general population take...

- ☐ Vitamin C (16% vs. 25%)
- ☐ Vitamin E (6% vs. 12%)
- ☐ Vitamin B (12% vs. 21%)

Q9: Please indicate which vitamins or dietary supplements you currently take. (Check all that apply)



# Good nutritional habits are related to other healthy habits

Regardless of whether or not they take supplements, adults age 18 and older who consume the dietary recommendations for fruits and vegetables are more likely to engage in other brain-healthy activities.

Percent who engaged in each healthy habit most of the time (5-7 days) during the last week by supplement use and consumption of dietary recommendations of fruits and vegetables

Brain-healthy behavior	Overall	Takes supplements and eats recommended amount of fruits and vegetables	Eats recommended amount of fruits and vegetables	Takes supplements	Neither
Nutritious meals	32%	56%	50%	30%	17%
Adequate sleep	30%	50%	42%	39%	31%
Socialized	38%	48%	52%	39%	29%
Managed stress effectively	29%	51%	45%	41%	27%
Exercised	17%	30%	29%	16%	9%

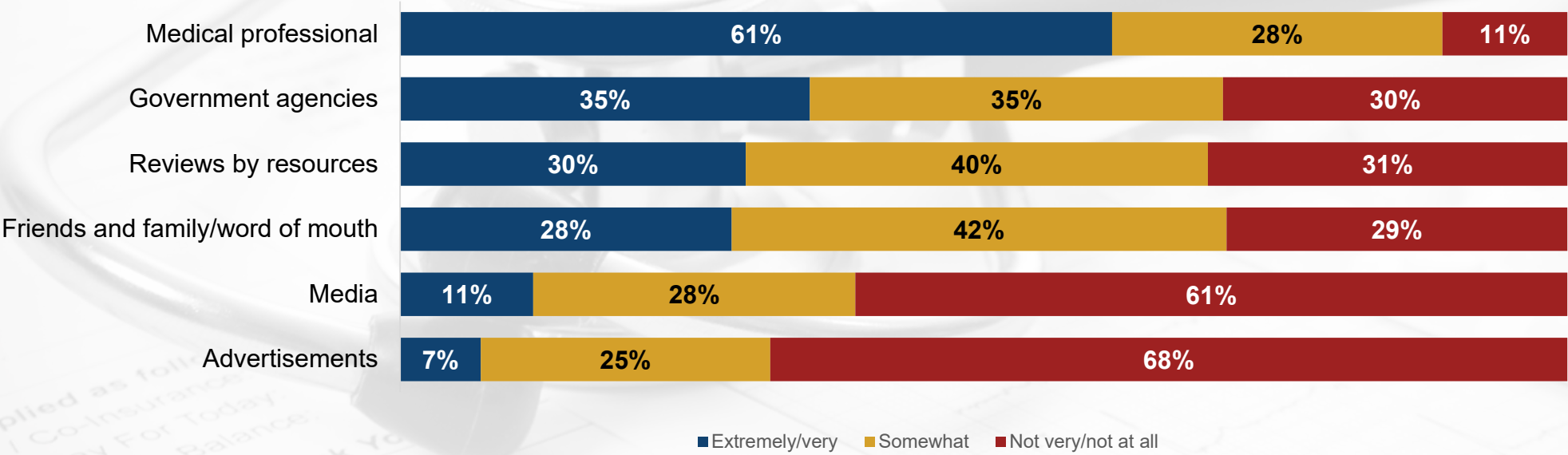


Q11: Below is a list of ways you might have felt or behaved. Please tell me how often you engaged in these activities during the past week. Never, Rarely (less than 1 day), Some or a little of the time (1-2 days), Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days), Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

# Adults turn to medical professionals for information

Doctor, nutritionists, and pharmacists are the most important sources of information in determining whether or not to take a vitamin or dietary supplement. Government agencies are in a distant second place. Advertisements and the media are not considered as important sources.

Importance of each as a source of information about whether to take a certain supplement



Q32 How important are each of the following as a source of information in determining whether or not to take a specific vitamin or dietary supplement? Extremely important, Very important, Somewhat important, Not very important, Not at all important  
Medical professionals (e.g., doctors, nutritionists, pharmacists, etc.); Reviews by resources such as WebMD, Consumer Reports, Mayo Clinic, etc.; Friends and family/word of mouth; Media (e.g., television segments, news articles, etc.); Advertisements; Government agencies (e.g., the Food and Drug Administration).





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This research was designed and executed by AARP Research