



Healthy Eating: Turning Good Intentions Into Lasting Habits

Exploring the Beliefs, Behaviors, and Barriers to Maintaining a Healthy Diet

Healthy eating is important to most adults 40-plus but putting it into practice isn't always easy. Many have a general sense of what they should be doing, but confidence in that knowledge varies—and everyday barriers and life circumstances often get in the way. Encouragingly, most are making the effort—or at least ready to start. Adults 65 and older stand out for their confidence and consistency.

Across age groups, the opportunity lies in meeting people where they are—with tools and support that make healthy eating feel more doable.



Based on a recent AARP study, this factsheet explores how adults 40 and older think about healthy eating and what gets in the way—even when the motivation is there.

Healthy Eating is on the Radar for Nearly Everyone

The majority of adults 40-plus are either eating healthy, trying to or are ready to start. Four in ten (40%) say they're actively *trying* to eat healthier and want to do even more. Another 30% say they haven't done much yet—but feel ready to begin.

Adults 65-plus are slightly more likely than others to say they consistently eat a healthy diet and are committed to it—though the percentage remains low at just 17%. By contrast, adults ages 40-49 are the most likely to say they *want* to get started but haven't yet (37%).

Only a small share say healthy eating just isn't a priority. While 9% say they don't prioritize healthy eating and are okay with that, 8% say they've tried before but haven't found success.

Taken together, the data paint a hopeful picture. **Most adults 40 and older are either on the path or ready to take the first step.** There's strong interest in doing better, even if they haven't quite figured out how. And because so few say they consistently eat healthy, nearly everyone could benefit from a little guidance, encouragement and support.

How Adults 40+ Describe Their Healthy Eating Habits

(Select One)

I'm trying to consistently eat a healthier diet and want to do more.

40%

I'm not doing as much as I'd like right now, but I want to get started on eating healthier.

30%

I consistently eat a healthy diet, and I'm committed to continuing to do so.

13%

I don't focus much on healthy eating, and I'm OK with that.

9%

I've tried some things in the past to have a healthier diet, but none of it has worked very well for me.

8%

Q6. Which of the following statements best describes you, personally, as it relates to consistently eating a healthy diet?

Only 1 in 10 adults 40-plus (13%) say they consistently eat a healthy diet and plan to stick with it—including 15% of women and 10% of men.



General Knowledge of Healthy Eating Leaves Room for Improvement

When it comes to healthy eating, many adults feel fairly confident in their knowledge. On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), the average rating is 7.1. Nearly half (48%) give themselves a high score—an 8, 9, or 10—while another 48% fall in the mid-range of 4 to 7.

Knowledge tends to rise with age. Adults 65-plus are most likely to give themselves higher marks, while those in their forties are more likely to land in the middle—suggesting a more tentative grasp of nutrition basics.

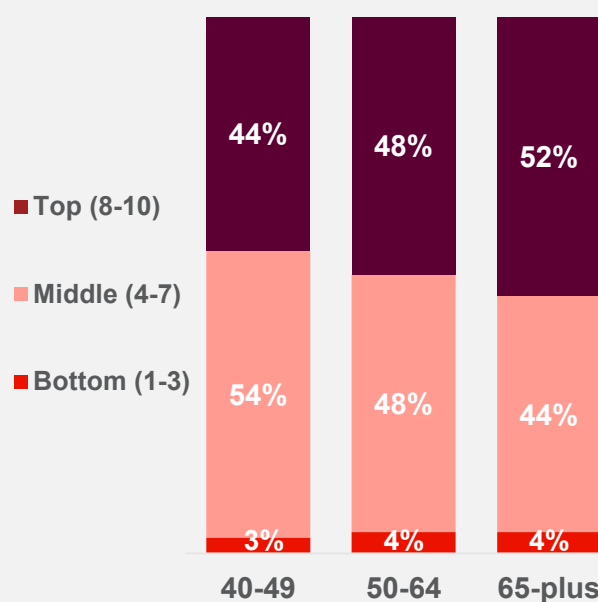
Encouragingly, most adults already believe in the value of healthy eating. Three in four (75%) agree it can improve health at any stage of life, and two-thirds (66%) believe small, gradual changes can lead to lasting improvements. Older adults are especially confident in these beliefs, while those in their 40s tend to be more hesitant—pointing to a need for encouragement and support, especially for those just getting started.

The foundation is there. The challenge isn't convincing people 40 and older that healthy eating matters—it's helping them follow through by making it feel more doable.

Knowledge About the Components of a Healthy Diet

Self Rating Scale 1-10

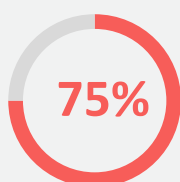
(1= Very little knowledge, 10= Extensive knowledge)



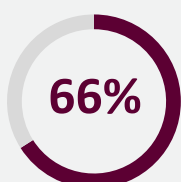
Q4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how knowledgeable are you about the components of a healthy diet??

Attitudes About Healthy Eating 40+

Net Agreement: Scores 6-7 out of 7



Healthy eating habits can lead to significant improvements in overall health, regardless of age.



Small, gradual changes to diet can lead to long-term improvements in health and well-being.

Q7. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

“Healthy eating includes a balanced diet, moderation, limiting fried and fatty foods, green veggies, more homemade as opposed to boxed and processed foods.”
—55+ participant

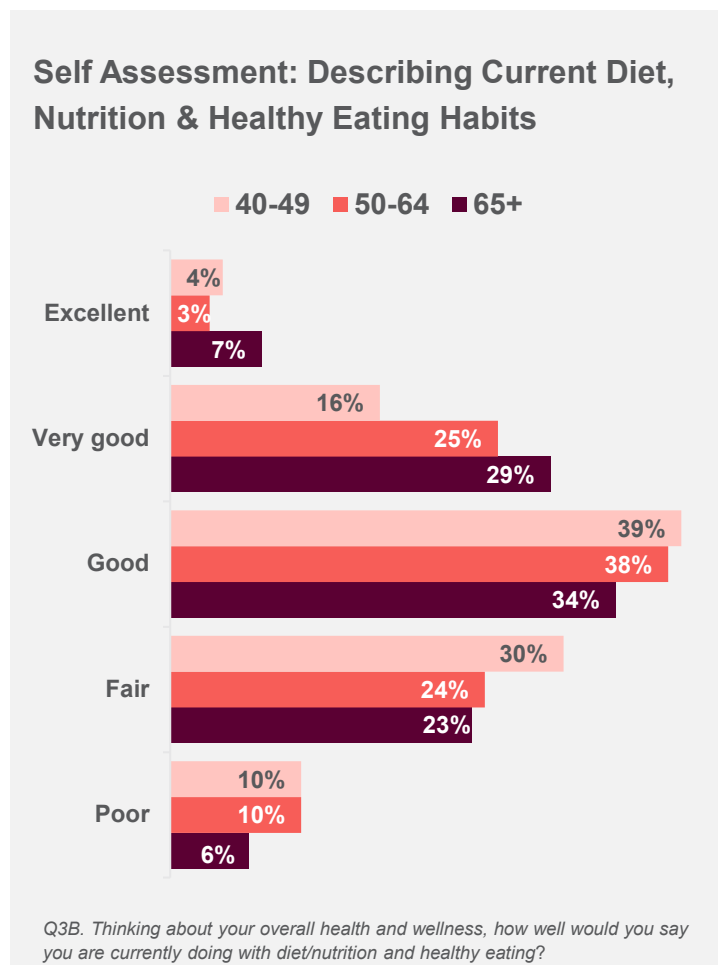
Following Through Is Tough—Especially for Younger Adults

Understanding what's healthy is one thing—sticking to it is another. **While most adults 40-plus feel they know what to eat, putting that knowledge into daily practice proves far more difficult.** Only 9% say maintaining a healthy diet is “very easy,” and about the same (10%) say it’s “very difficult.” Most fall somewhere in the middle, reflecting the ongoing challenge of eating well consistently.

When asked how well they're currently doing with diet, nutrition, and eating habits, about a third (37%) say they're doing “good,” while 29% say “very good” or “excellent.” Still, a full third (34%) rate their habits as only “fair” or “poor.”

For many adults age 65 and older, healthy eating isn't just a goal—it's part of their daily routine. Adults 65-plus are more likely than younger age groups to describe their habits as “very good” or “excellent” (36%, compared to 28% of those 50—64 and 20% of those 40—49), and are the least likely to say they're doing only “fair” or “poor.” They're also most likely to say that maintaining healthy eating habits feels easy.

For most, healthy eating is still a work in progress. Few feel it's very easy, but many are doing their best—making an effort, even if consistency remains a challenge.



“No one's perfect. The key is to be mindful and when you have a cheat meal, don't make it a cheat day or cheat week or cheat month.”
—55+ participant

Cost is the Strongest Barrier—More than Taste, Convenience, or Cravings

When it comes to healthy eating, **cost stands out above all other challenges**. Nearly 4 in 10 adults 40-plus strongly agree that eating healthy can be too expensive—more than any other potential barrier listed. And 16% say they're often or always unable to afford the healthier foods they'd prefer.

Other barriers like cravings, convenience, taste, or cooking confidence are less likely to get in the way. Just 13% strongly agree that they're "not a healthy foods type of person," suggesting that healthy eating doesn't carry a negative stigma—and that most people see it as something they can embrace, even if they haven't fully mastered it yet.

Still, staying consistent takes work. These barriers may not affect everyone, but they can add up—especially for those balancing tight budgets, busy schedules, or long-standing habits.



“ I live on a fixed income and all my expenses are increasing so buying better quality foods is getting most difficult.”
—55+ participant

Perceived Barriers to Healthy Eating 40+

Net Agreement: Scores 6-7 out of 7

Consistently eating healthy [would be too/can be] costly.

39%

Healthy food is not very convenient/hard to get.

16%

I am not a “healthy foods type” person.

13%

Healthy eating is too restrictive.

12%

I can't eat healthy because I have cravings for “unhealthy foods”.

12%

I don't like the taste of healthy foods.

11%

Cooking healthy food is too complicated.

11%

I don't know what foods are the best to eat.

10%

I don't know how to cook so the food is healthy.

10%

Q16. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Most Believe Healthy Eating Still Matters

Beliefs shape behavior—and **most adults 40-plus hold views that support healthy eating rather than resist it.** Few feel it's “too late” to make a difference: just 6% strongly agree that the damage is already done, while many more firmly reject that idea.

There's also little evidence of defeatism or indulgence. Only 11% strongly agree that “life's too short to deny yourself food that makes you happy.” In contrast, a full 60% strongly agree that while genetics play a role, healthy eating can help lessen the impact of hereditary conditions.

These findings suggest that **most adults age 40-plus see healthy eating as something that's still within their control**—and still worth pursuing.

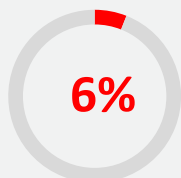
At the same time, many are looking for more support: 40% agree—including 21% who strongly agree—that they need more reliable hints and tools to help them learn how to eat healthy. The challenge isn't changing minds—but helping people follow through on the beliefs they already hold.



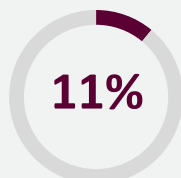
Doctors are powerful motivators: 54% of adults 40-plus say they're more likely to change their diet if their doctor recommends it—especially those 65 and older.

Attitudes About Healthy Eating 40+

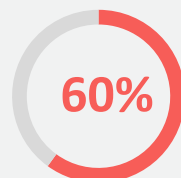
Net Agreement: Scores 6-7 out of 7



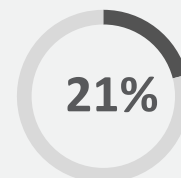
At my age the damage is done, healthy eating will not make any significant changes to my health.



Life is too short to deny yourself whatever food makes you happy, even if it's considered unhealthy.



Although genetics play a significant role, healthy eating habits can lessen the impact of hereditary diseases.



I need reliable hints and tools to help me learn how to consistently eat a healthy diet.

Q7 & 16. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Implications: The Path Forward: Encouragement, Not Overhaul

Most adults 40-plus want to eat better—and many are already making the effort. They feel fairly informed overall—though confidence varies—and believe diet matters. And while cost is a concern, they don't see major barriers standing in their way. But knowing what to do is only half the battle. The real challenge is sticking with it—finding the time, energy, and motivation to eat well day after day.

Older adults, especially those 65-plus, show what's possible. With more confidence, fewer obstacles, and stronger habits, they offer a glimpse of how healthy eating can become more routine over time. Yet even among this group, only a small percentage say they consistently eat well and plan to stick with it—suggesting **there's room for growth at every age.**

Across age groups, there's an opportunity to meet people where they are. That means:

- Encouraging small steps that feel doable.
- Sharing simple, practical tips—especially around cost savings.
- Offering support, not judgment, through the ups and downs of daily life.

When it comes to healthy eating, most people aren't starting from scratch—but they may need help turning good intentions into lasting habits.





Want to learn more?

The following AARP articles provide tips, considerations and insights related to healthy eating.

- [Healthy Eating and Brain Health](#)
- [6 Foods to Skip After 50](#)
- [Are Processed Foods Bad for Your Brain?](#)
- [Superfoods for Brain Health](#)

Methodology

The survey of 1,541 U.S. adults ages 40 and older was conducted between May 8 and 22, 2025, via Foresight 50+. The questionnaire survey length was 14 minutes. The data are weighted according to the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS).

About AARP

AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering people 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With a nationwide presence, AARP strengthens communities and advocates for what matters most to the more than 100 million Americans 50-plus and their families: health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also produces the nation's largest circulation publications: *AARP The Magazine* and *AARP Bulletin*. To learn more, visit www.aarp.org/about-aarp/, www.aarp.org/español or follow @AARP, @AARPenEspañol and @AARPadvocates on social media.

About Foresight 50+

Foresight 50+ is a research panel and survey service focused on gathering insights about Americans aged 50 and older. It's a joint effort between NORC at the University of Chicago and AARP, aiming to provide high-quality data on this influential demographic. The panel combines NORC's scientific rigor with AARP's expertise in the 50+ age group.



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