



2024 IFIC  
**SPOTLIGHT**  
SURVEY

# American Perceptions of Food Ingredient Safety

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September 2024



# METHODOLOGY

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The International Food Information Council (IFIC) commissioned an online survey among U.S. consumers to measure knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about the safety of food ingredients. One thousand adults ages 18 years and older completed the online survey from June 6-10, 2024, and were weighted to ensure proportional results. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

The Bayesian confidence level for the survey sample (n=1000) is 3.5, which is roughly equivalent to a margin of error of  $\pm 3.1$  at the 95% confidence level. Callouts of statistically significant results are included where appropriate on slides displaying results. Something is statistically significant if the result cannot be attributed to random chance. Statistical significance in this report is only compared within each demographic group (e.g. age, race, gender, etc.).

**SUGGESTED CITATION:**

International Food Information Council (IFIC). 2024 IFIC Spotlight Survey: American Perceptions of Food Ingredient Safety. September 2024.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Numerous factors influence consumers' decisions about what to eat and what to avoid. According to the [2024 IFIC Food & Health Survey](#), confidence in the safety of the food supply is down significantly, and the factors that Americans use to determine the safety of food products while shopping are wide-ranging. This *IFIC Spotlight Survey* provides additional insights into the Americans' perceptions and actions toward food, food ingredients, and the type of information that informs their food decisions.

This *IFIC Spotlight Survey* of 1,000 Americans is a further analysis of the impact of information sources that inform their perceptions of the safety and healthfulness of food and food ingredients. It reinforces the awareness and power of the ingredient statement on packaged foods, as many Americans indicate avoiding specific food ingredients.

Some Americans consider the health risks and health benefits of what they eat and drink, however many do not consider about either. Still, many have heard of specific food ingredients, and some indicate avoiding them based on what they have heard about them.

Consumers are making their own safety assessments when they consider the health risks associated with food. When considering the potential health risks of packaged foods and beverages, one-third of consumers (31%) see the mere presence of an ingredient as most important. The importance placed on presence outpaces the amount of an ingredient (21%) and the number of ingredients (16%). However, 31% of consumers do not consider the presence, amount, or number of ingredients when considering potential health risk.

While science may lead the way in keeping food safe, the public does not necessarily want to hear about the “science”. Rather, consumers desire factual, practical, and actionable information they can use to make more informed food decisions.

Source: 2024 IFIC Spotlight Survey: American Perceptions of Food Ingredient Safety



## KEY FINDINGS

### **Nearly 1 in 4 Americans do not think about either the health risks or the health benefits of what they eat and drink.**

When asked which they consider more often, the health risks or the health benefits of what they eat and drink, more Americans consider the health benefits (30%) than the health risks (8%). However, most Americans think about the risks and benefits equally (39%). The remaining 23% said they do not think about health risks or the health benefits.

### **Among those who avoid dyes/colors, the top two reasons for avoidance is the belief that they are unhealthy or unsafe to consume.**

When asked why they avoid dyes and colors, most say they believe they are unhealthy (28%) or unsafe (25%) to consume. Fewer Americans say they avoid them because they are not natural (13%), heard from a trusted source that they should (12%), and/or have heard that some states say they are unsafe (8%).

### **Among those who have heard of at least one specific ingredient in packaged foods or beverages, dyes/colors, and low- and no-calorie sweeteners are avoided most often.**

Among those who report hearing about at least one of the eleven food ingredient presented to them, dyes/colors (35%), sugar substitutes (34%), MSG (29%), bioengineered/GMO ingredients (27%), nanoplastics (26%), and preservatives (25%) are avoided most often. Fewer Americans report avoiding caffeine (19%), flavors (18%), allergens (18%), gluten (17%), and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (16%). Nearly 3 in 10 (29%) say they do not avoid any of these ingredients in foods or beverages.

### **Two in three Americans have heard about caffeine, low- and no-calorie sweeteners, as well as flavors in foods or beverages.**

While many people have heard about caffeine (71%), sugar substitutes (68%), flavors (66%), dyes/colors (60%), preservatives (59%), MSG (45%), and bioengineered/GMO ingredients (44%) in foods or beverages, far fewer have heard about nanoplastics (25%) and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (14%).

## KEY FINDINGS

**Among those who actively avoid certain food ingredients, trust about what food ingredients to eat and avoid is highest among dietitians, medical experts, and scientists.**

Trust (defined as a rating of 4 or 5 out of 5) is highest in registered dietitians (73%), primary healthcare providers (62%), food and nutrition scientists/experts (69%), chefs or culinary professionals (53%), and health-focused websites (51%). Less than half report trust in family and friends (47%), government agencies (45%), and posts in their social media feeds (20%).

**About 4 in 10 Americans say they actively avoid ultraprocessed foods and/or plant-based meat alternatives.**

When Americans were given a list of 13 types of foods and beverages and asked if they actively avoid any of them, ultra processed foods (41%) was cited most often, followed by plant-based meat alternatives (37%), processed meats (29%), and plant-based dairy alternatives (27%). About 1 in 10 actively avoid dairy (10%), frozen foods (9%), and/or meat and poultry (8%). One-quarter (25%) said they did not avoid any of the foods or beverages listed.

**When considering potential health risks associated with packaged food and beverages, 3 in 10 Americans do not consider the amount, presence, or number of ingredients.**

When asked if the amount, number, or presence of an ingredient is most important when considering potential health risks associated with packaged foods and beverages, most (31%) said the presence of an ingredient. Fewer (21%) said the amount of an ingredient, followed by 16% who said the number of an ingredient is most important. The remaining 31% said they do not consider any of these three factors.

**Among various topics in food, Americans express the highest levels of concern about E.coli and heavy metals.**

Nearly 1 in 3 Americans are extremely concerned about E. coli in ground beef (32%). Slightly fewer express the same level of concern for lead, cadmium, and/or arsenic in baby food (29%) and mercury in seafood (27%). Less than 1 in 6 are extremely concerned about allergens in packaged foods (16%) and allergens in foods served at restaurants (15%).

# KEY FINDINGS

**Among those who report being extremely or very concerned about heavy metals in food, half say they have changed their eating habits as a result.**

For those who expressed being extremely or very concerned about cadmium in chocolate, mercury in seafood, or lead, cadmium, and/or arsenic in baby food, more than one half (52%) say they have changed their eating habits because of their concern.

**When it comes to the type of information about the safety of food ingredients that Americans want more of, facts and practical actions are more desired than science.**

More than 7 in 10 report a preference for either more facts they can learn (38%) or more practical actions they can take (33%). Fewer reported wanting more science they can read (14%), and the same percentage said they did not want more information about the safety of food ingredients (14%).



# IMPLICATIONS

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This *IFIC Spotlight Survey* allows us to better understand what Americans consider when making food decisions about certain foods and/or food ingredients.

Whether it be weighing the health risks or health benefits of a food, or assessing the healthfulness, safety, naturalness, amount, number, or presence of a food ingredient, Americans appear to be using various “safety assessment” methods to inform their food choices.

Trust is part of this decision-making process. Registered dietitians, healthcare providers, food and nutrition scientists and experts, as well as chefs and culinary professionals are trusted sources for Americans when it comes which food ingredients to eat and which to avoid.

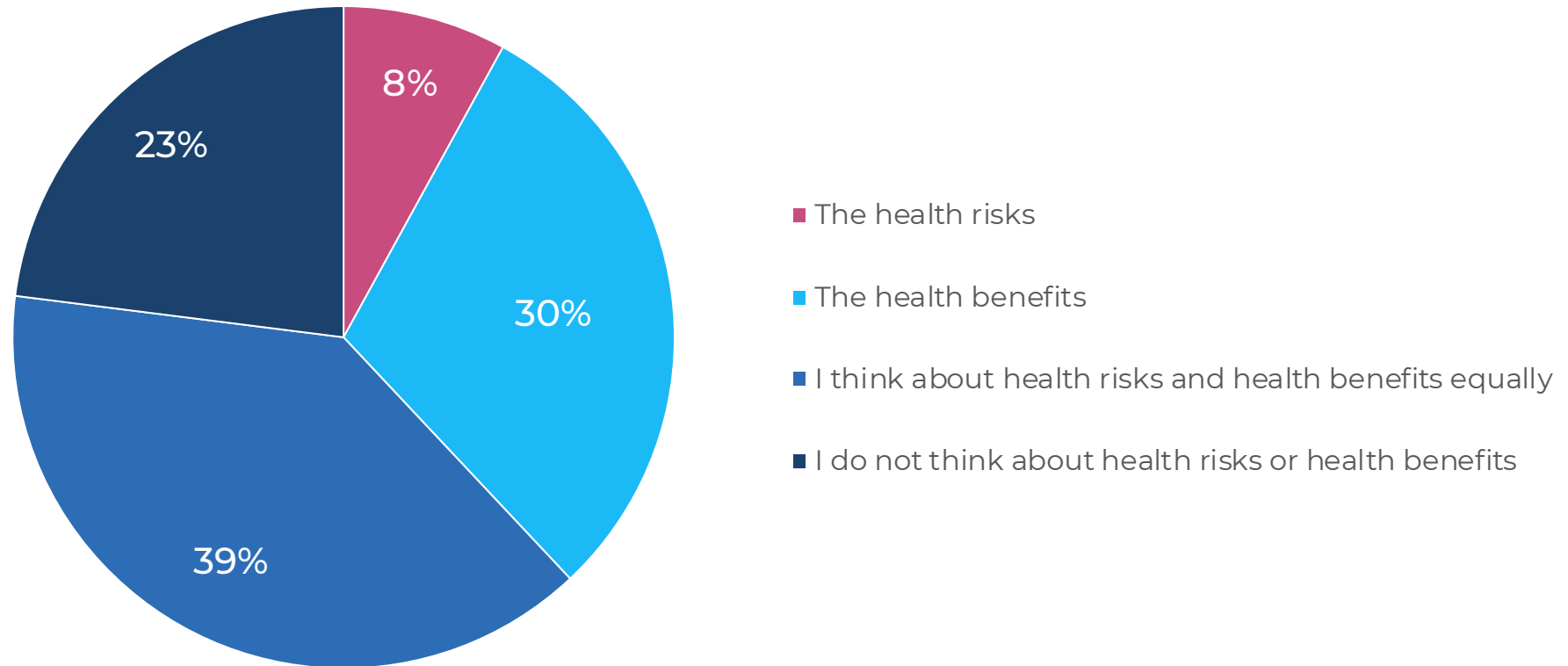
While advancements in food science and nutrition continue, and science-based professions are trusted sources of food information, science is not what consumers want to hear most about when it comes to the safety of food and food ingredients. Instead, consumers prefer more facts they can learn and practical actions they can take to keep themselves and their families safe.

By delivering more compelling information that meets the needs and desires of today’s consumer, Americans can become more equipped with the type of information they want, but more importantly, with the type of information they will use to make more informed food decisions.



# Nearly 1 in 4 Americans do not think about either the health risks or health benefits of what they eat and drink.

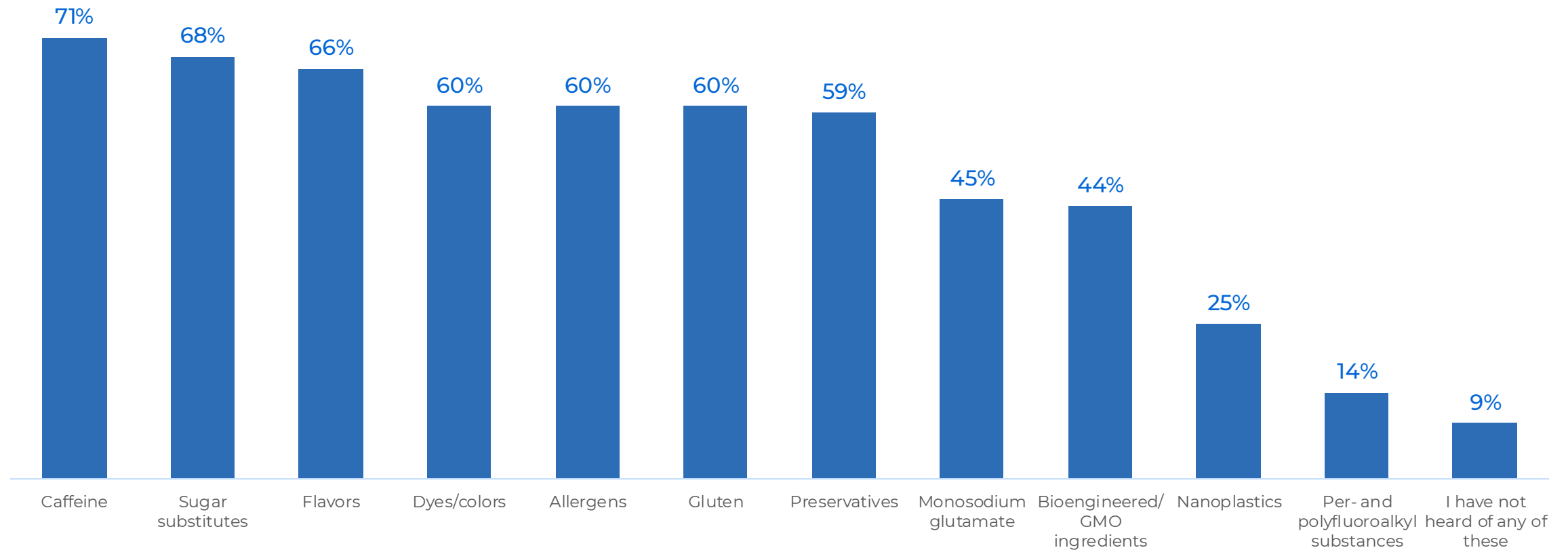
Americans consider the health benefits of what they eat and drink (30%) more often than the health risks (8%). However, most Americans think about the risks and benefits equally (39%).





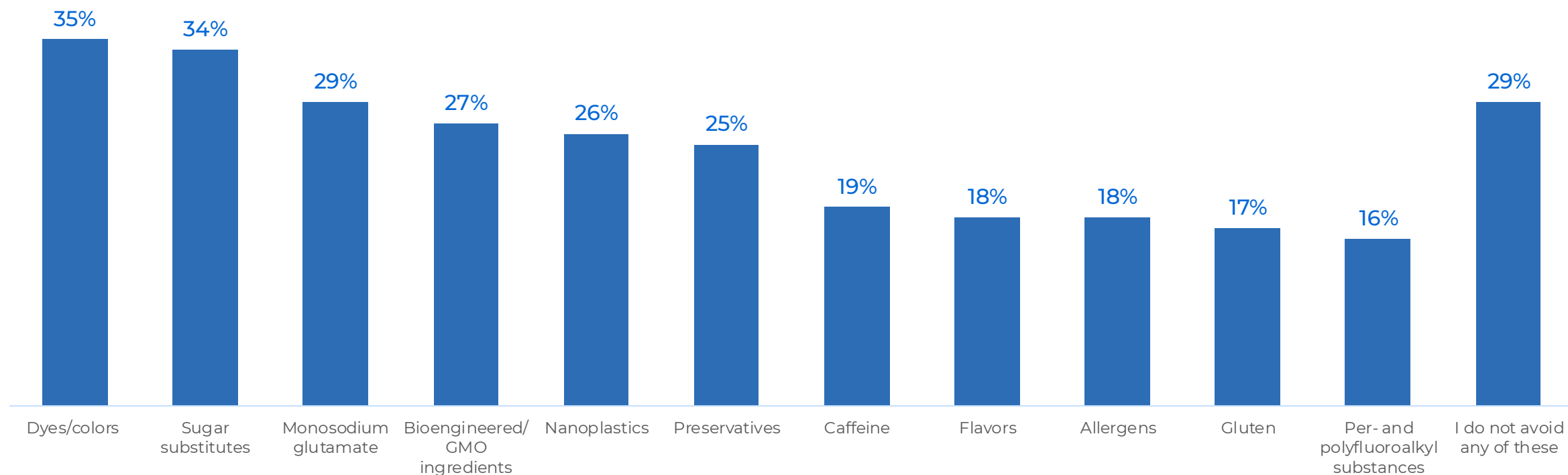
# 2 in 3 Americans have heard about caffeine, low- and no-calorie sweeteners, as well as flavors in foods or beverages.

Far fewer Americans have heard about nanoplastics (25%) and PFAS (14%) in their foods and beverages.



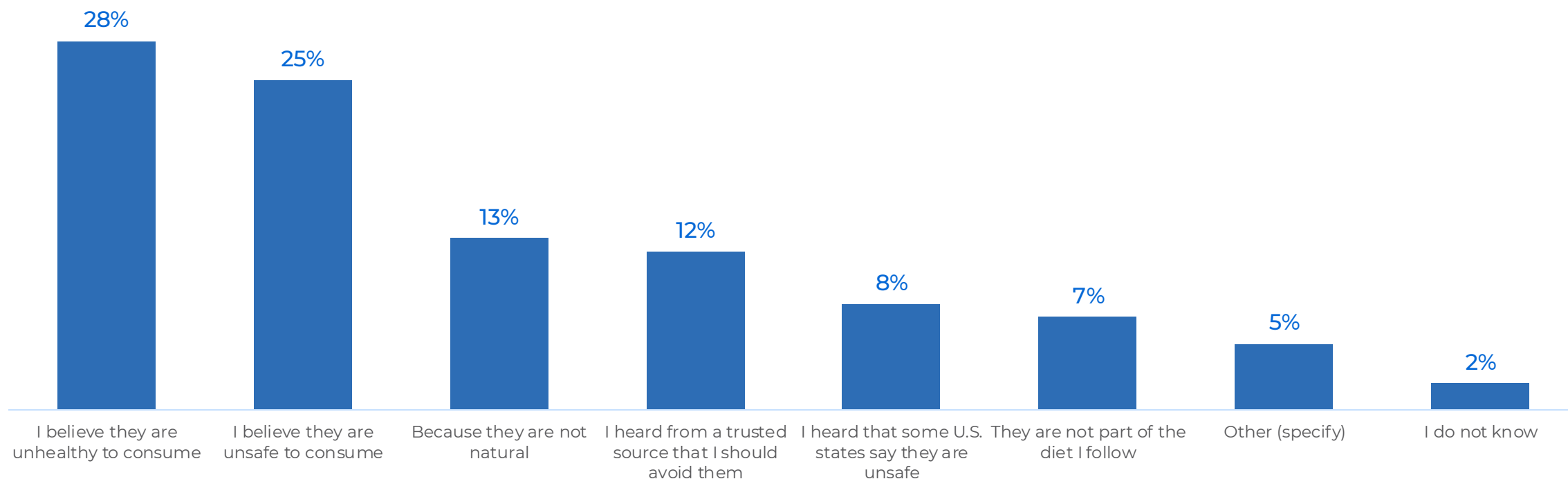
# Among those who have heard of at least one specific ingredient in packaged foods or beverages, dyes/colors, and low- and no-calorie sweeteners are avoided most often.

Three in ten (29%) do not avoid any of the following ingredients in packaged foods or beverages.



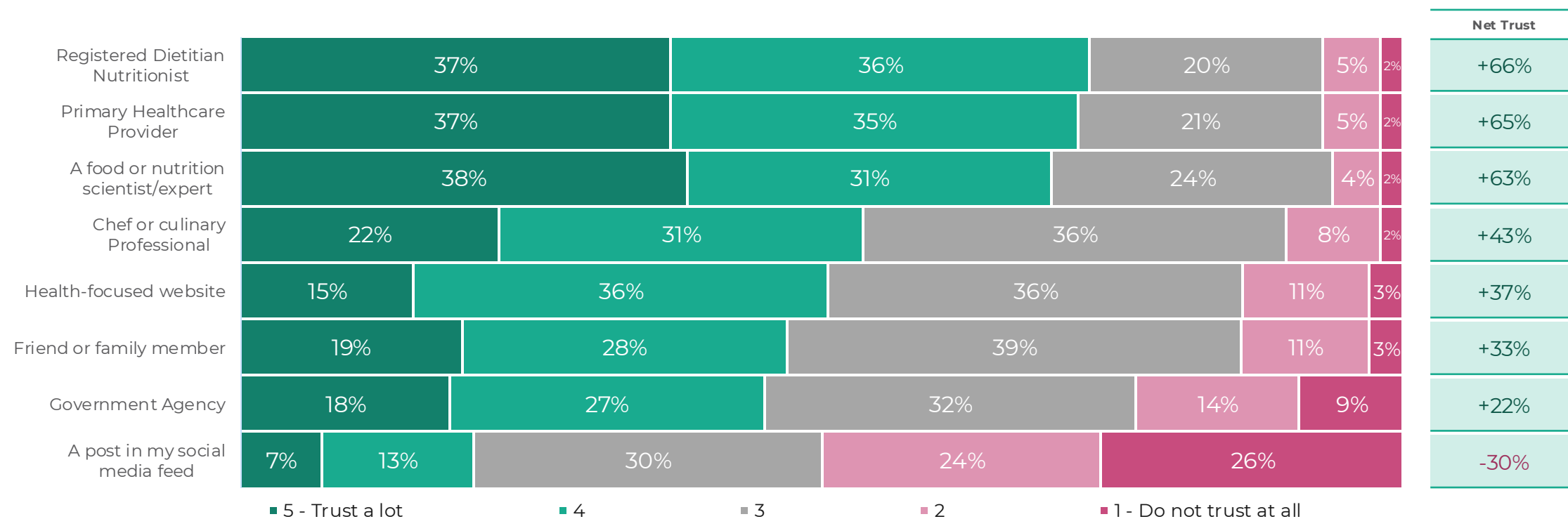
# Among those who avoid dyes/colors in their foods or beverages, the top two reasons for avoidance is the belief that they are unhealthy or unsafe to consume.

About half as many avoid dyes/colors because they believe they are not natural (13%) and/or they were told to avoid them from a trusted source (12%).



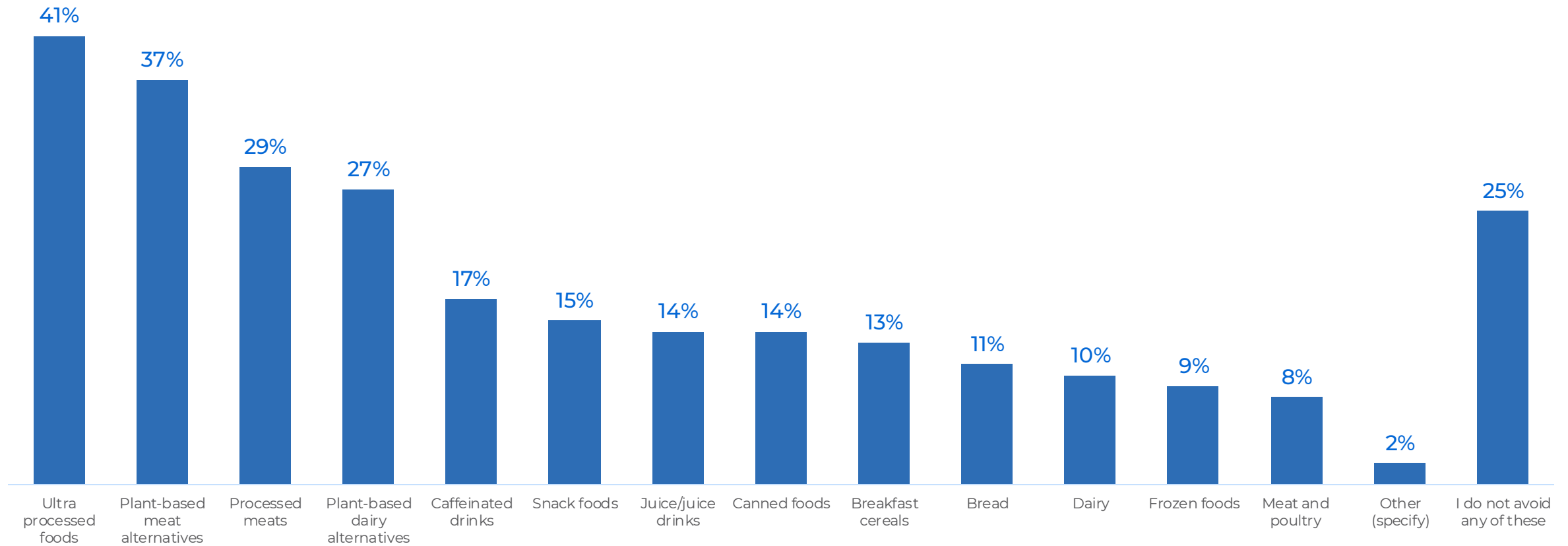
# Among those who actively avoid certain food ingredients, trust about what food ingredients to eat and avoid is highest among dietitians, medical experts, and scientists.

While nearly 3 in 4 (73%) have high levels of trust in registered dietitian nutritionists, half (50%) express low levels of trust in posts they encounter in their social media feeds.



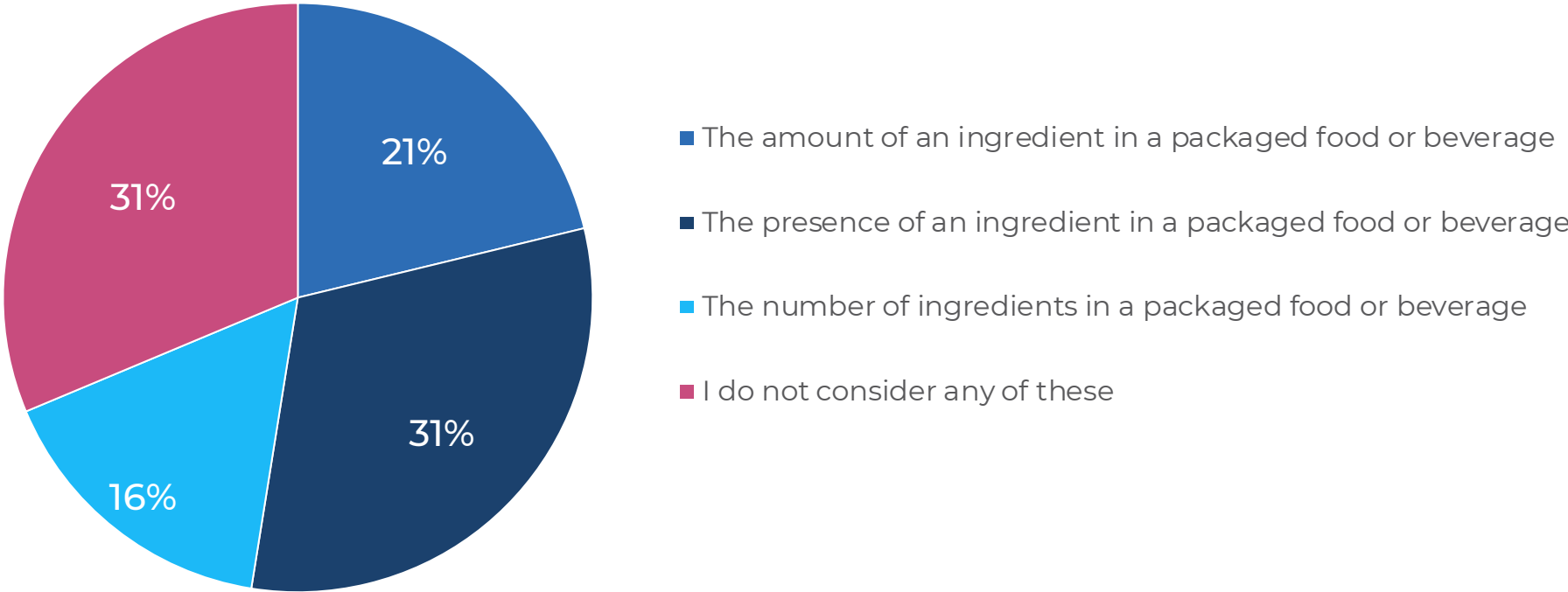
# About 4 in 10 Americans say they actively avoid ultraprocessed foods and/or plant-based meat alternatives.

Nearly 3 in 10 say they actively avoid processed meats (29%) and plant-based dairy alternatives (27%). Conversely, one-quarter (25%) say they do not avoid any of the foods listed.



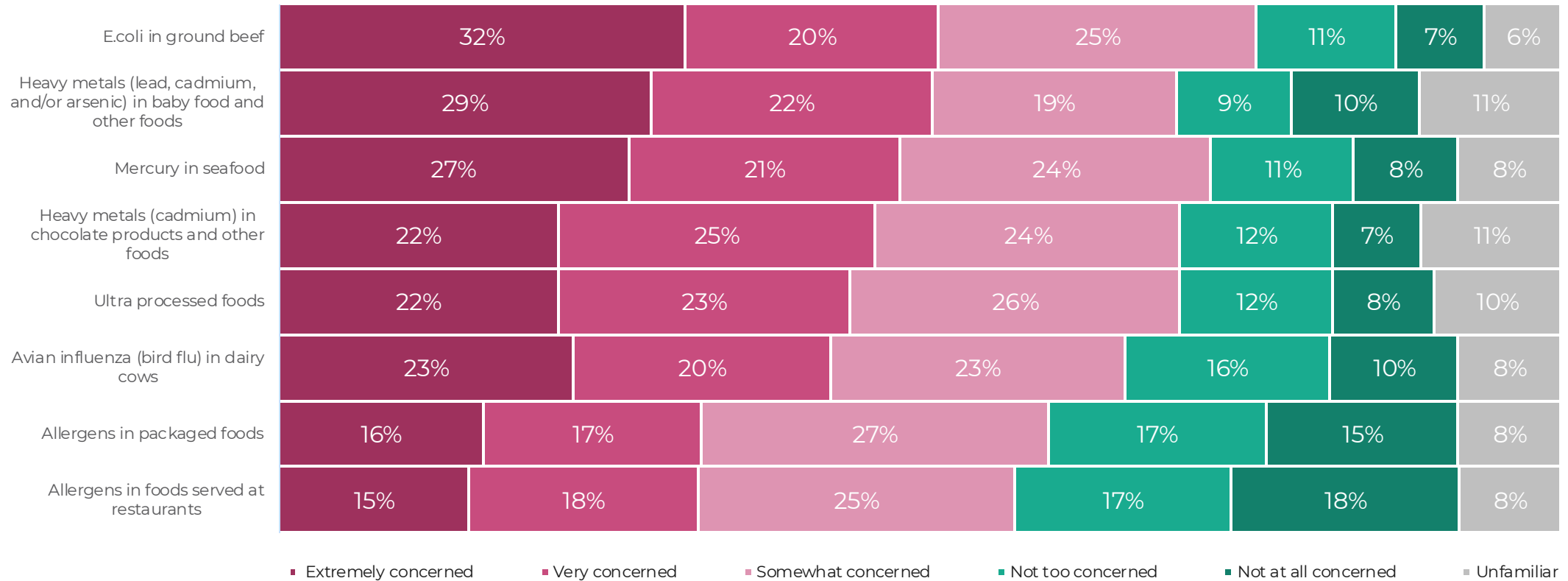
# When considering potential health risks associated with packaged food and beverages, 3 in 10 Americans do not consider the amount, presence, or number of ingredients.

More Americans consider the presence of an ingredient (31%) to be most important when considering potential health risks than the amount of an ingredient (21%) or number of ingredients (16%).

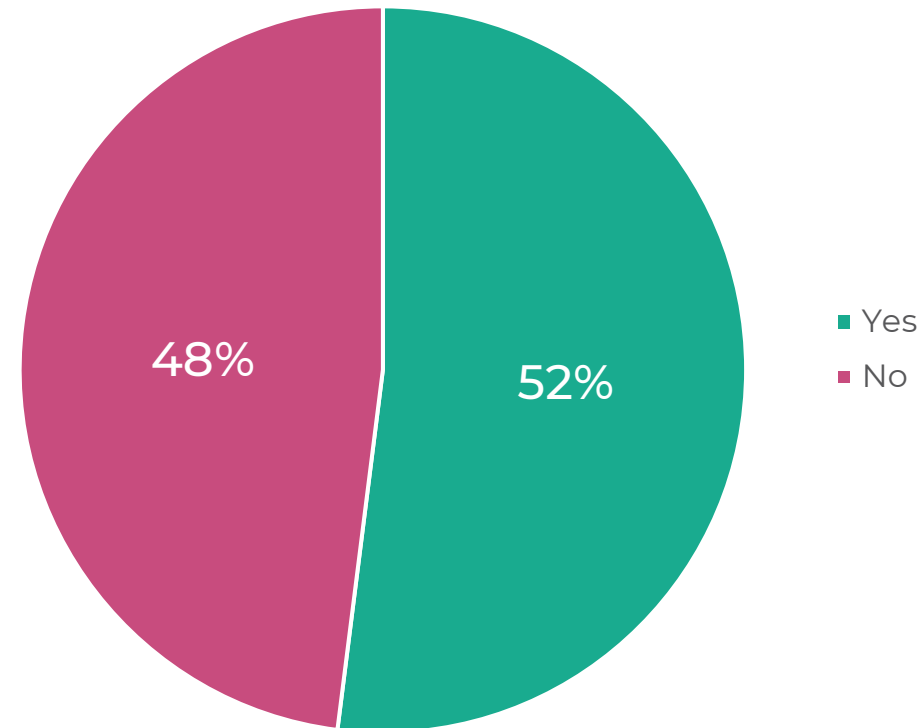


# Among various topics in food, Americans express the highest levels of concern about E.coli and heavy metals.

Although Americans express lower levels of concern for food allergens, 1 in 3 are very or extremely concerned about allergens in packaged foods and allergens in food served at restaurants.



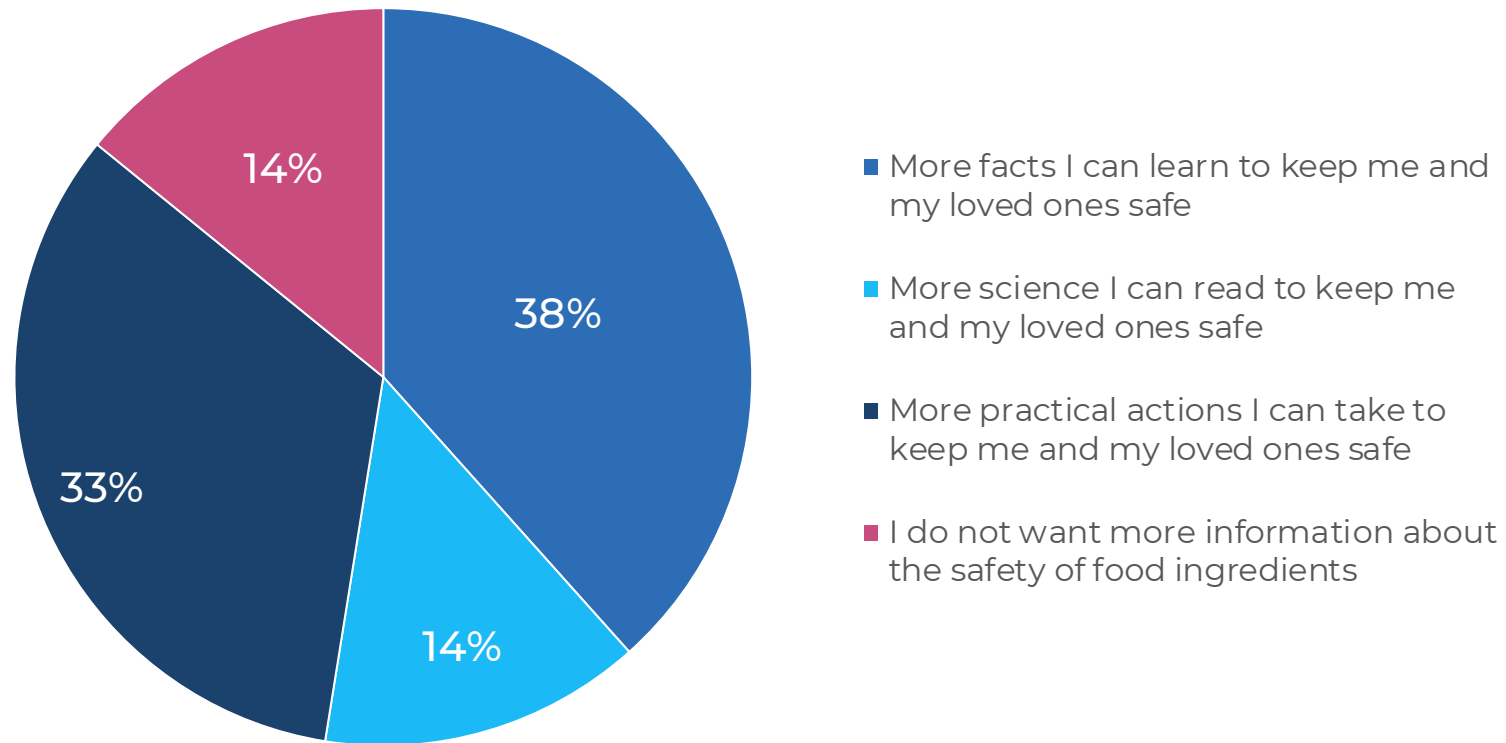
# Among those who report being extremely or very concerned about heavy metals in food, half say they have changed their eating habits as a result.





# When it comes to the type of information about the safety of food ingredients that Americans want more of, facts and practical actions are more desired than science.

One in seven (14%) do not want more information about the safety of food ingredients.





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