



AT THE TABLE:

Food & Health In Our Community

Findings from a 2026 Word In Black reader survey.

By Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.

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Executive Summary

We have come to this strange cultural moment where food is both tool and weapon. I am grateful for it. My entire life I knew, and many others knew, that our daily bread was itself a kind of scripture of our origins, a taste track of our lives. It is a lie that food is just fuel. It has always had layers of meaning...”

–Michael W. Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South*

Food is deeply personal, cultural, and political – and, for Black Americans, it sits at the intersection of all three. It’s a source of heritage and community, but it exists alongside rising grocery bills, product safety concerns, and a nutrition information landscape that can seem impossible to navigate. The result is a community that is health-aware but systemically constrained.

To shed light on how food shapes the health, culture, and wellbeing of Black people, Word In Black’s Insights & Research Division surveyed 1,249 Black Americans across the country between April 22, 2026, and June 8, 2026. The survey explored three key areas:

Black Americans’ feelings, beliefs, and perceptions about food.

How Black Americans’ food choices and environment affect health and wellbeing.

What food resources and strategies would help the Black community thrive.

This report presents the key findings from that survey, centering Black Americans’ lived realities, concerns, and priorities.

Key Findings

Food safety trust is low:

60.2% of respondents felt somewhat or very insecure about whether the food they buy is safe to eat, reflecting a broader erosion of trust in the American food system among Black consumers.

Access to food is strained by rising costs:

While many respondents did not report outright food insecurity, rising grocery prices are forcing difficult trade-offs. Many report swapping healthier options for cheaper, less nutritious alternatives in order to stay within budget.

Eating meals prepared outside of the home is common, especially among the young:

More than 1 in 3 respondents (35.2%) reported eating meals outside of the home – including fast food three or more times per week. Black Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 do so nearly twice as often (41%) as those 55 and older (22.5%).

When it comes to food systems, Black Americans want both structural change and better education:

73% of respondents called for lower prices on fresh fruits and vegetables, 42% want more grocery stores in their neighborhoods, and 38% expressed a desire for more nutrition education.

Together, these findings reveal that improving food health in the Black community requires more than individual behavior change. They underscore the need for public health strategies that address the structural, economic, and cultural forces shaping how Black Americans eat as well as centering the voices and lived experiences of the community itself.



Introduction

In the Black community, food is not just sustenance. For generations, Sunday dinners brought entire communities together for fellowship and the sharing of resources. The term “soul food” became a metaphor for flavorful, traditional dishes created from plantation scraps and discards, remixed with foods and techniques that survived the Middle Passage. What started out as a means of survival for the enslaved evolved into a rich cultural heritage recognized worldwide.

But those foods, and the eating patterns associated with them, carry hidden dangers. Soul food is often high in fat, sugar, and sodium, and Black culture tends to embrace sugary beverages like sweet tea and artificially sweetened soft drinks. As a result, Black communities have disproportionately high rates of cardiometabolic disorders such as [acute coronary heart disease](#), [hypertension](#), and [type 2 diabetes](#).

Combined with rising food costs, confusing messages from government authorities like the Food and Drug Administration, and worrisome headlines about food safety, the food picture for the Black community gets blurry.





Why It Matters

The outsized impact of diet and food-related illnesses is not simply the result of individual choices. It is the result of decades of systemic inequality and marginalization of Black Americans, including redlining and community disinvestment as well as limited access to healthy food, and a food system that has not always served the Black community equitably.

At the same time, rising food costs, rampant misinformation, and declining trust in public institutions are reshaping how people decide what to eat every day. When 47% of a community has little to no awareness of federal nutrition guidelines or current changes to said guidelines, and when 60% don't feel the food they buy is safe, the public health implications are significant and urgent.

Understanding the relationship between Black America and food is essential information for healthcare leaders, policymakers, educators, journalists, and community organizations working to improve health outcomes in the U.S. This report provides new insight into how the Black community thinks about food, the barriers that stand between them and healthier choices, and the solutions they believe would have the greatest impact.

A Black woman with curly hair is shown in profile, eating a slice of pizza. She is wearing a patterned top and a blue wristband. The background is a food stand with a menu board that has a red sign and the word "STEAK" visible. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor setting.

Who We Surveyed

Our survey respondents were Black American readers of Word In Black and 10 partner publishers from across the U.S. The results are weighted to reflect the age and regional distribution of adult respondents; other demographic characteristics, such as education and income, are not weighted.

In the unweighted sample, the largest age group was 55 and older ($n = 557$), and the plurality of respondents lived in the South ($n = 419$). Educational attainment within the sample was high, with 397 respondents holding postgraduate or professional degrees. Household incomes varied, with the largest group reporting annual incomes of \$100,000 or more ($n = 373$). (See Table 4 in the technical appendix for a full demographic breakdown.)

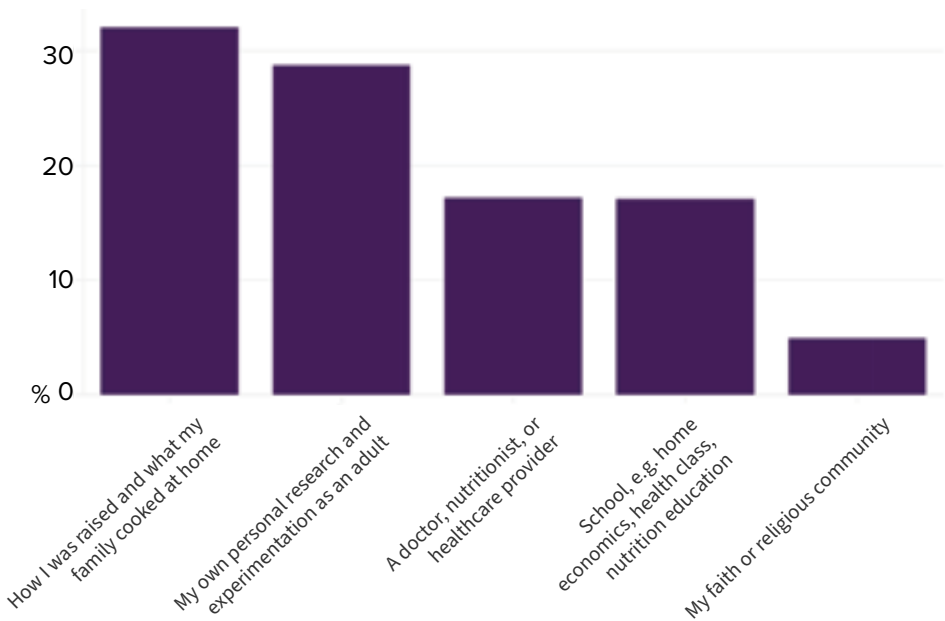
For more details on methodology, see the [technical appendix and survey instrument](#).

¹ Survey responses were statistically weighted so the overall sample matches the U.S. adult Black population on key demographics (specifically age and U.S. Census region). Weighting adjusts each respondent's contribution to the totals to reduce over- or under-representation of certain groups.

Food Sentiment

A number of psychological, physiological, and sociological factors influence food choices in the Black community. That includes an individual’s food traditions, which are typically formed in childhood. Thirty-two percent of respondents said their foundational knowledge of food and what to eat came from their homes and families (Figure 1). While familial food traditions have the most influence, it’s clear that personal exploration of what one can eat is also part of one’s food curriculum; 29% indicated their own personal research and experimentation formed the basis of their current food knowledge.

Figure 1.
Thinking about what you know about food and how to eat – where did that knowledge originally come from?



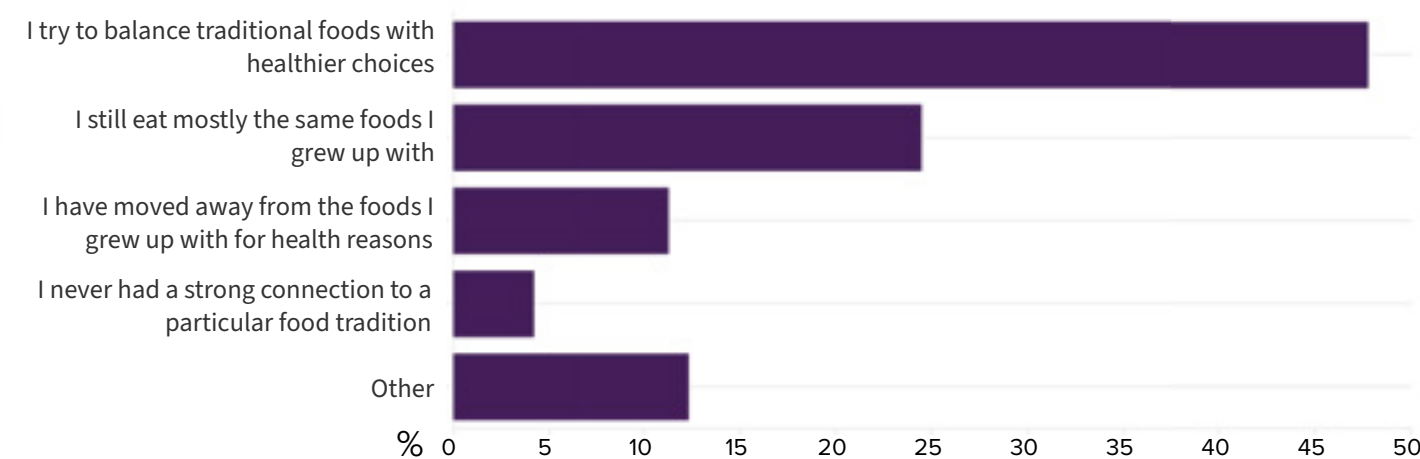
Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff

When asked “which of the following best describes how you think about the food you grew up eating,” nearly half of the respondents (approximately 47%) reported trying to balance traditional foods with healthier choices.

The result suggests a widespread awareness of the tension specifically between Black cultural food

practices and health considerations (Figure 2). Roughly a quarter of participants reported they still eat mostly the same foods they grew up with, while about 12% have moved away from their traditional diet for health reasons. These findings reflect Black Americans’ nuanced relationship with food heritage, which affects how we eat.

Figure 2.
Which of the following best describes how you think about the food you grew up eating?



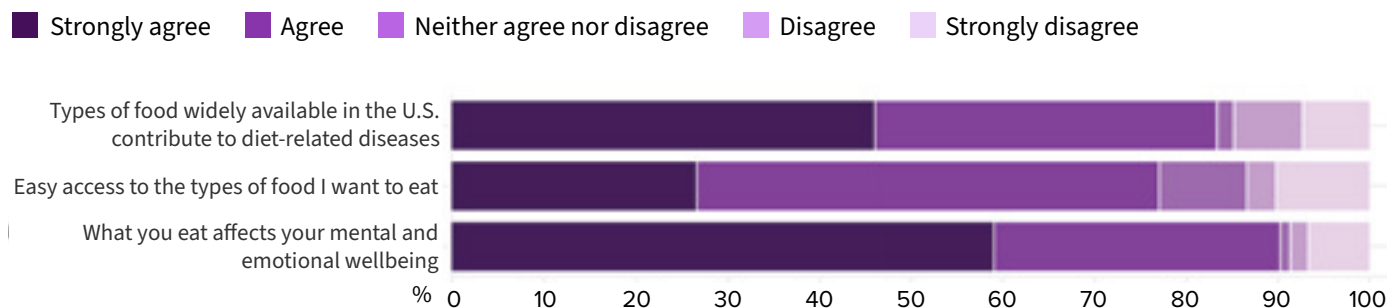
Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff



Relatedly, 46% of survey respondents strongly endorsed the belief that the food in the U.S. in general contributes to diet-related diseases (e.g., type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease) (Figure 3). That finding demonstrates not only the need to negotiate tensions between cultural diet and good health, but also the everyday choices available in American grocery stores and restaurants.

Figure 3.

The extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements

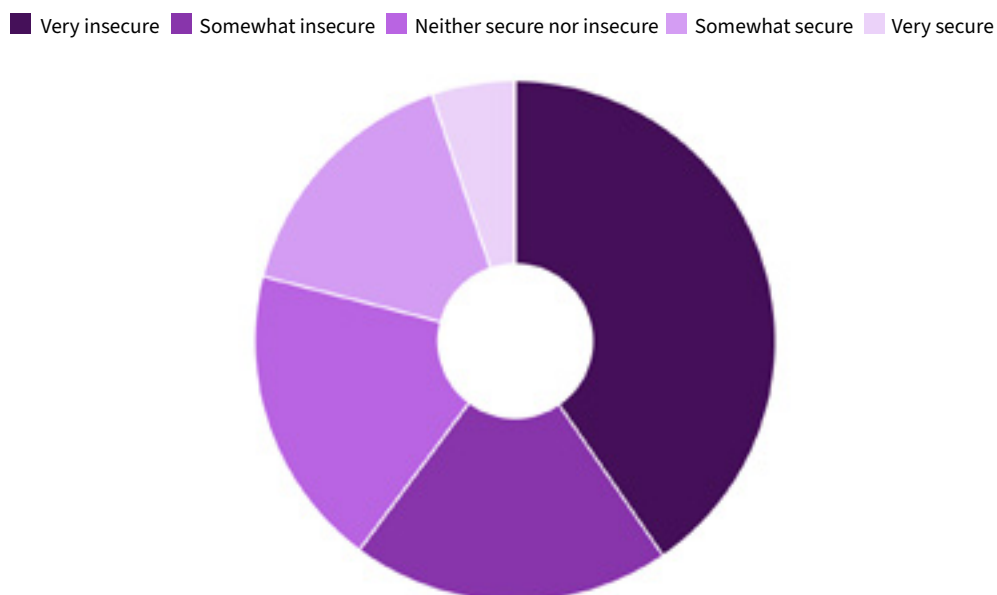


Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff

At the same time, when asked, a startling 60.2% of respondents felt somewhat or very insecure about food safety in the U.S. (Figure 4). These beliefs reflect a lack of trust in the safety and health of food available to Black consumers. It also indicates the need for a critical discussion about the state of food in the U.S.

Figure 4.

When I think about current food safety in the U.S., I feel...



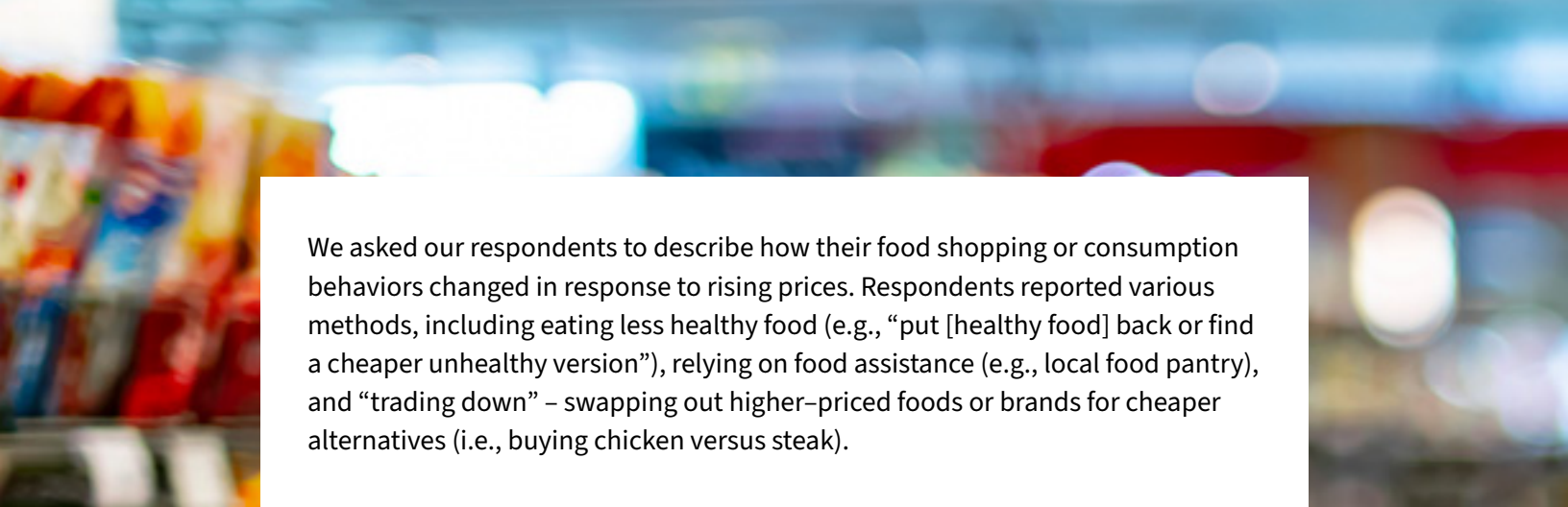
Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff



Access

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s most recent findings, [nearly 23% of Black Americans live in food-insecure households](#) – a number that has only increased from 2023 to 2024. Meanwhile, a [2024–2025 International Food Information Council \(IFIC\) study](#) found that more than six in ten Americans have noticed significant increases in their grocery bills during the last year. While many Word In Black respondents did not report struggling with food access, we found that grocery price increases affected food shopping behaviors, shifting the discussion toward access to high-quality, healthy food.





We asked our respondents to describe how their food shopping or consumption behaviors changed in response to rising prices. Respondents reported various methods, including eating less healthy food (e.g., “put [healthy food] back or find a cheaper unhealthy version”), relying on food assistance (e.g., local food pantry), and “trading down” – swapping out higher-priced foods or brands for cheaper alternatives (i.e., buying chicken versus steak).

Looking for deals

“Look for manager’s specials”

Buying less / cutting back

“I buy less food and carefully choose it.”

Sales and coupons

“I buy less, look for sales, use coupons, use apps, etc.”

Trading down

“Eat cheaper types of food. Chicken vs steaks”

Stretching meals

“Shop for meals that will stretch, eat less meat”

Preserving food / avoiding waste

“I buy food and freeze things so that I don’t waste money and look for sales and discount codes”

Reduced healthy options

“Put it back or find a cheaper unhealthy version”

Still trying to eat healthy

“I try to buy healthy foods that are on sale or if I have coupon for certain items”

Budget discipline

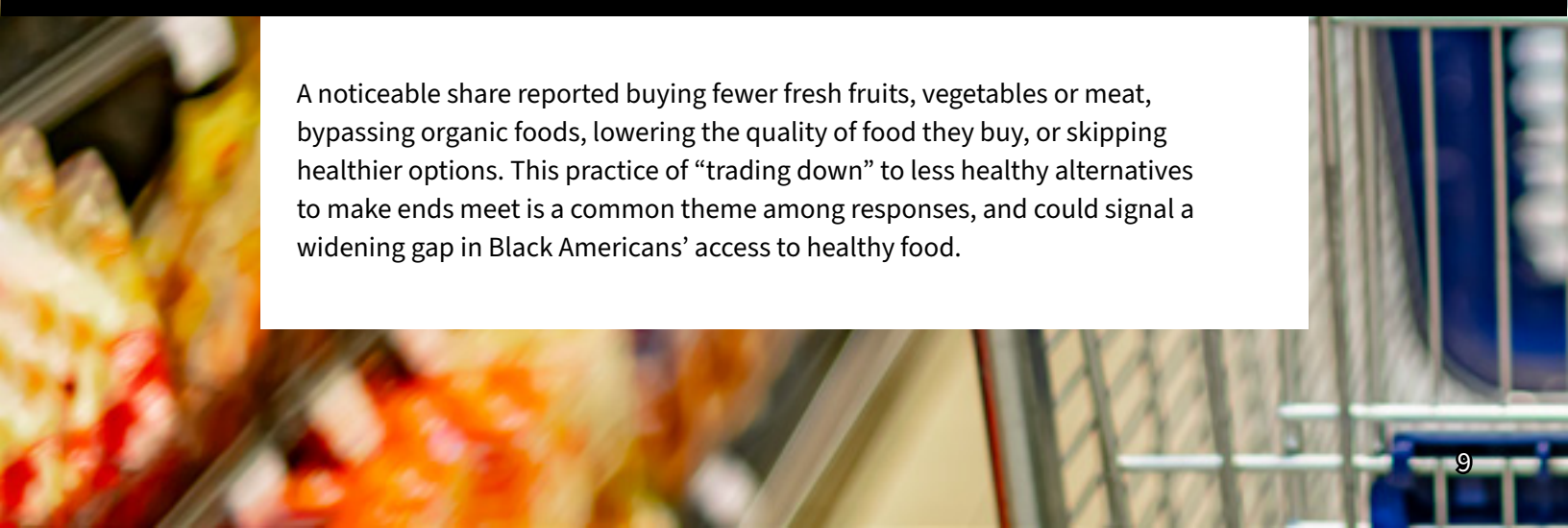
“I budget accordingly and comparison shop, but do not compromise quality.”

Cook more at home

“I try to cook more at home and eat less”

Food assistance

“I rely on the local food pantry, buy cheaper food and eat lighter on the weekends.”

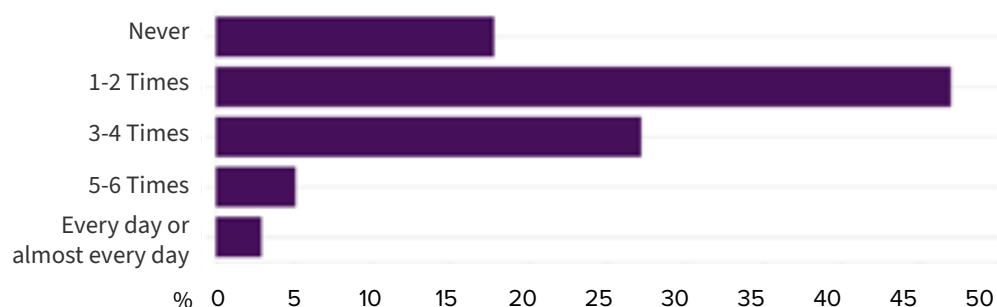


A noticeable share reported buying fewer fresh fruits, vegetables or meat, bypassing organic foods, lowering the quality of food they buy, or skipping healthier options. This practice of “trading down” to less healthy alternatives to make ends meet is a common theme among responses, and could signal a widening gap in Black Americans’ access to healthy food.

Choices, Choices

Figure 5.

In a typical week, how often do you eat meals prepared outside of your home – including fast food, takeout, or restaurants?



Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff

Where and how Black Americans obtain their meals reveals important patterns about the structural and economic forces shaping dietary choices. Though dining out on occasion can fit into a healthy diet, doing so too often can be bad for your health. Restaurant take-out, and fast-food meals in particular, are often high in sodium, unhealthy fats, and added sugars, and low in nutrients. Regularly eating those meals has been linked to weight gain, high blood sugar, and high blood pressure.

Despite the dangers, more than one in three respondents (35.2%) reported eating meals prepared outside of the home – including fast food – three or more times per week (Figure 5).

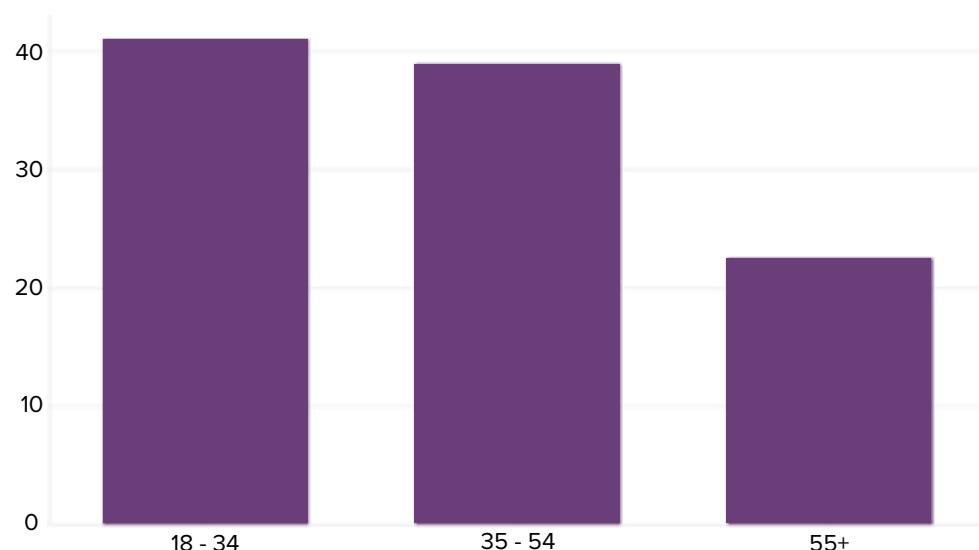
However, age differences do exist. Younger respondents (18-34) are much more likely to eat out three or more times per week (41%) compared to older respondents (55+, 22.5%). This [mirrors national data](#), which shows that more than a third of this age group consumes food prepared outside of the home multiple times a week). [Consumption drops drastically](#) once Americans hit age 60.

The age gap could signal the need for targeted public health campaigns to reduce reliance on fast food among younger Americans.

Figure 6.

% Eating outside of home 3+ times per week

By age group



Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff

Choices also abound when deciding where to purchase food.

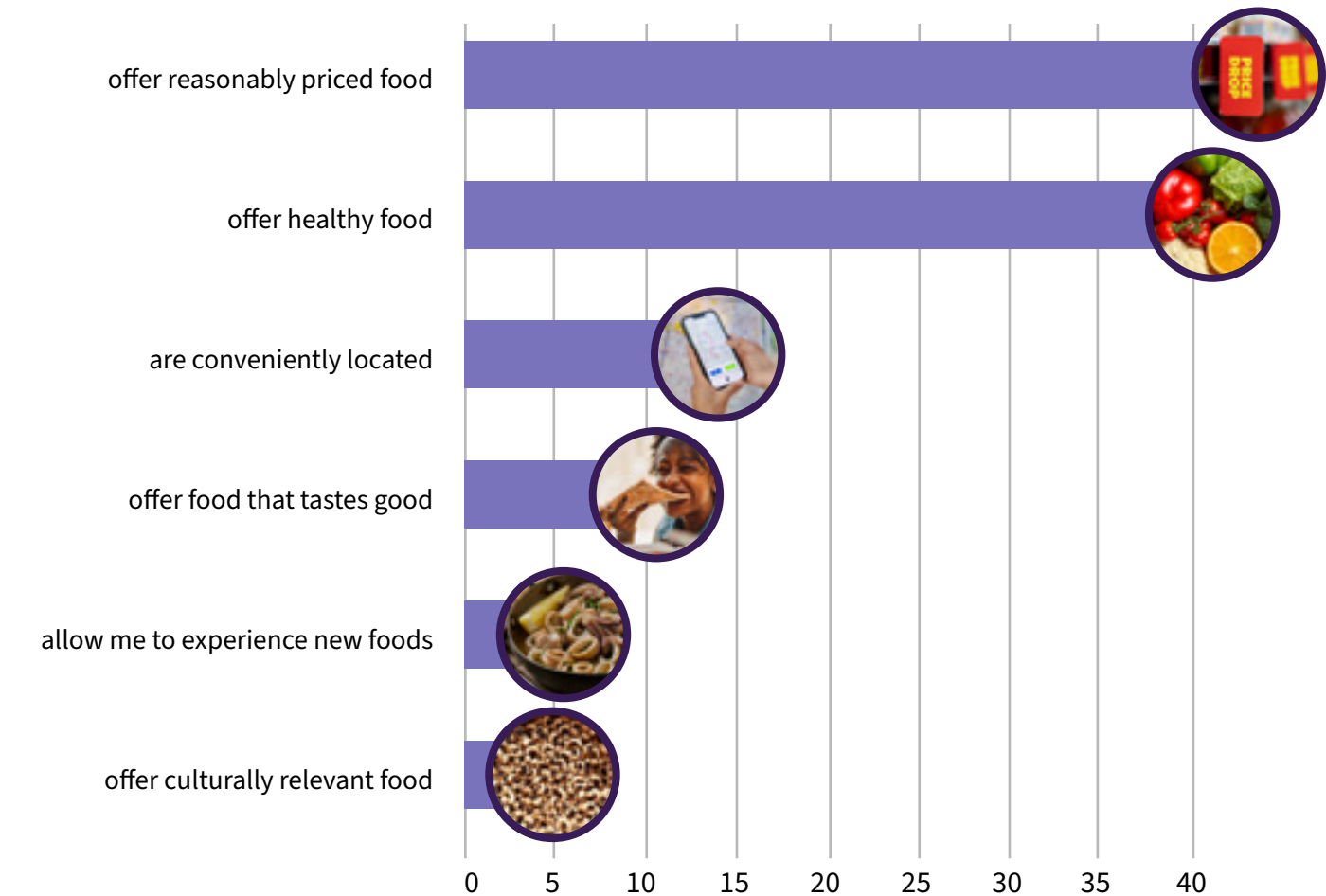
Of the factors that could dictate where someone chooses to shop for groceries, two in five respondents said it’s paramount to choose a grocery store where food is reasonably priced (Figure 7). Reasonable prices beat out taste, convenience, and healthfulness as a deciding factor among the survey respondents.

This differs from the findings of an [IFIC national survey](#), in which taste has been a driving factor for food and beverage purchases since 2006 – more than price, convenience, and healthfulness. Black Americans’ prioritization of price over flavor and healthfulness likely reflects the compounding effects of economic inequality and limited access to affordable, quality food options in many Black communities.



Figure 7.

What is the most important factor when choosing where you shop for food?



Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff

Food, Health, and Wellbeing

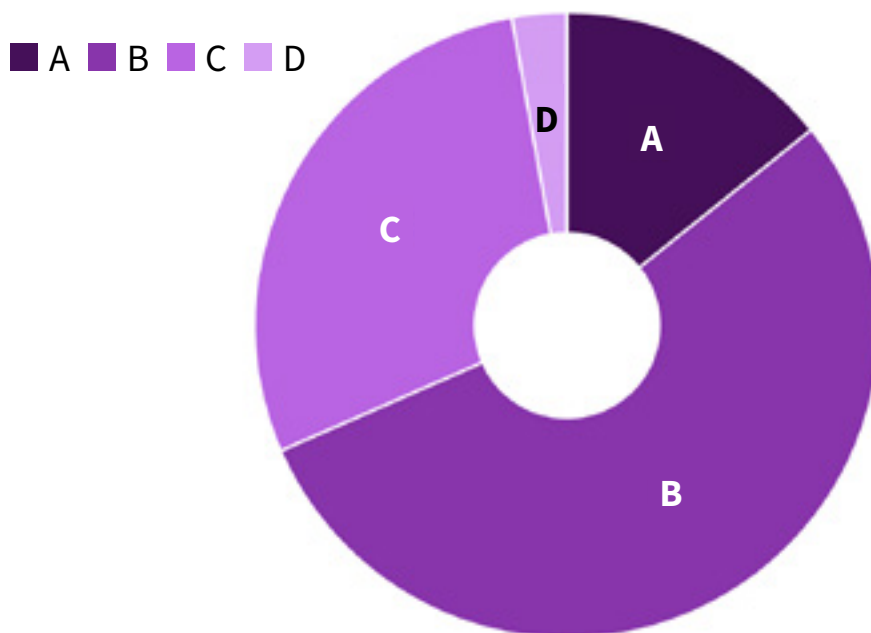
In this survey, we asked Black Americans to rate the healthfulness of their personal diet. Fifty-four percent of respondents graded their diet a “B,” compared with 51% of respondents in a [general U.S. population survey](#) who gave themselves the same grade (Figure 8).

Nine of 10 respondents agreed that diet affects emotional and mental wellbeing (Figure 3), a connection that [nutrition scientists](#) have long endorsed. In fact, respondents who gave their diet an A grade were overwhelmingly likely to report positive overall health: 86% rated their general health as excellent or very good, compared with 48% of those who graded their diet a B, 10% of those who graded it a C, and 5% of those who graded it a D (Figure 9).

Together, these findings suggest that respondents see and experience food not just as a matter of diet, but as closely tied to their overall health and emotional wellbeing.

Figure 8.

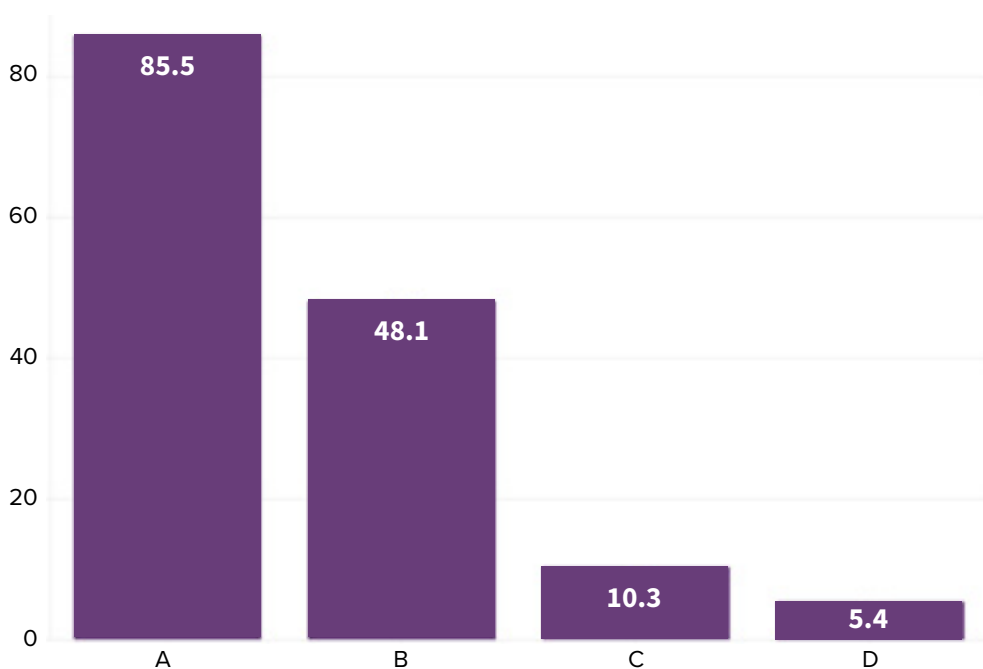
Overall, how would you grade your diet in terms of healthfulness?



Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026)
Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff

Figure 9.

Excellent or very good general health, by diet grade



Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026)
Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff



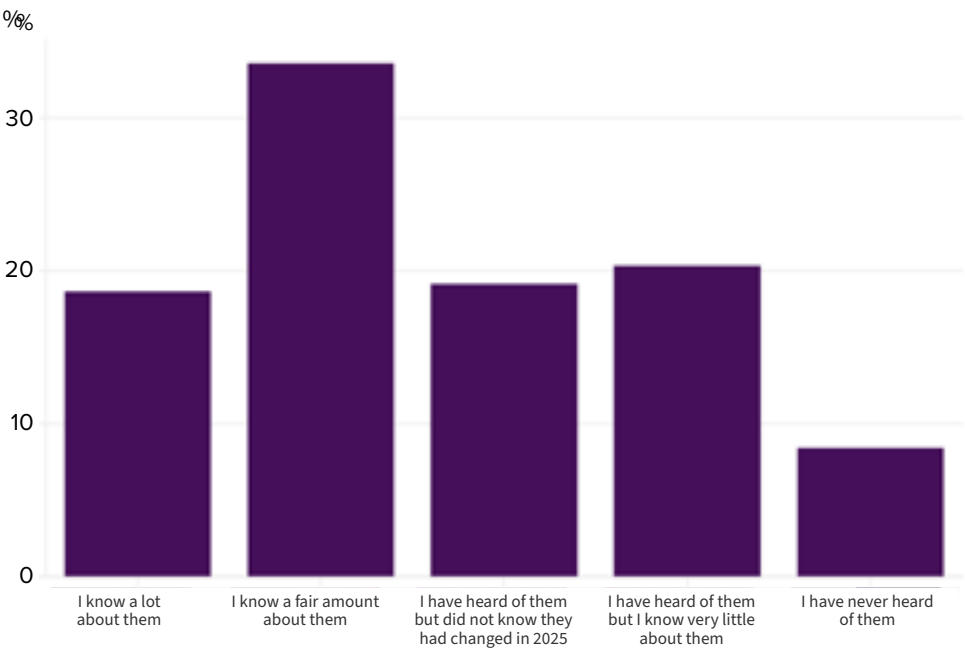
Increasing Food Knowledge and Diet Health

Developing healthy food habits begins with closing the gap between awareness and access, ensuring that nutrition information is both available and actionable. However, navigating competing information, sorting through unreliable nutrition advice on social media, and keeping up with rapidly shifting government nutrition standards to find trusted food guidance is no small task.

To illustrate this point, 47% of our survey respondents had either a) heard very little of the new, official government–approved food and nutrition guidelines, b) had heard of the guidelines but were unaware that Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. had them updated in 2025 or c) had never heard of them at all (Figure 10).

Figure 10.

Which of the following best describes your familiarity with the “Dietary Guidelines for Americans” (US government–approved food and nutrition guidelines)?



Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026)
Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff

According to the IFIC’s 2025 national survey, conversations with registered dietitian nutritionists and personal healthcare professionals are the most trusted sources of information on what foods to eat or avoid. Fortunately, according to our respondents, these conversations are indeed happening either regularly or occasionally with nutritionists or other healthcare providers (73% stated they’ve had nutrition conversations with their providers) (Figure 11).

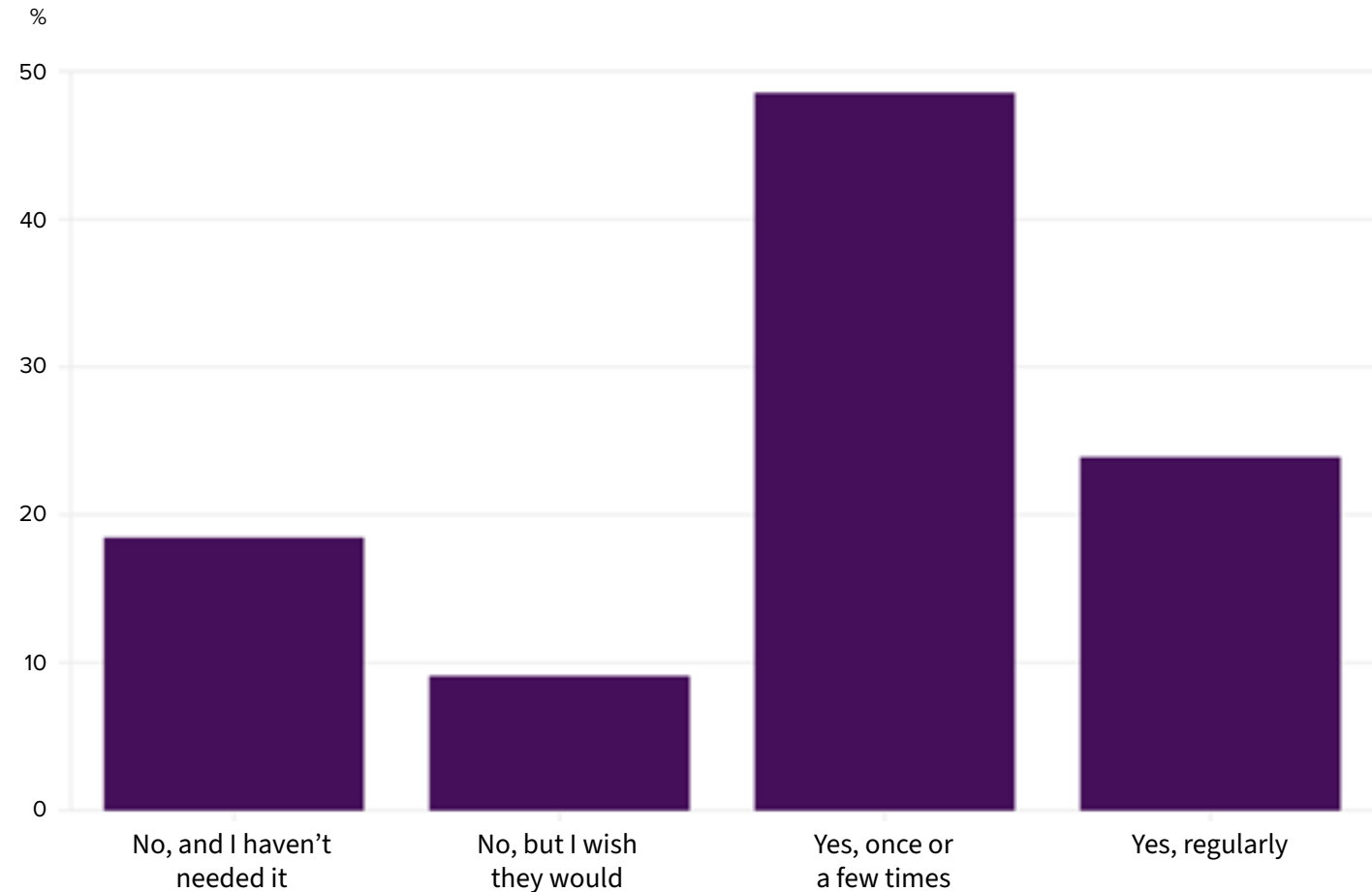
Finally, to gather information to inform public health initiatives on nutrition, this survey asked respondents: What would make it easier for you to eat more healthily?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many respondents named structural changes as top priorities, such as lower prices on fresh fruits and vegetables (73%) or more grocery stores and fresh food markets in their neighborhoods (42%). However, 38% of participants also want more education about food and nutrition. This appetite for knowledge signals an important entry point for potential public health interventions to support Black American nutrition.



Figure 11.

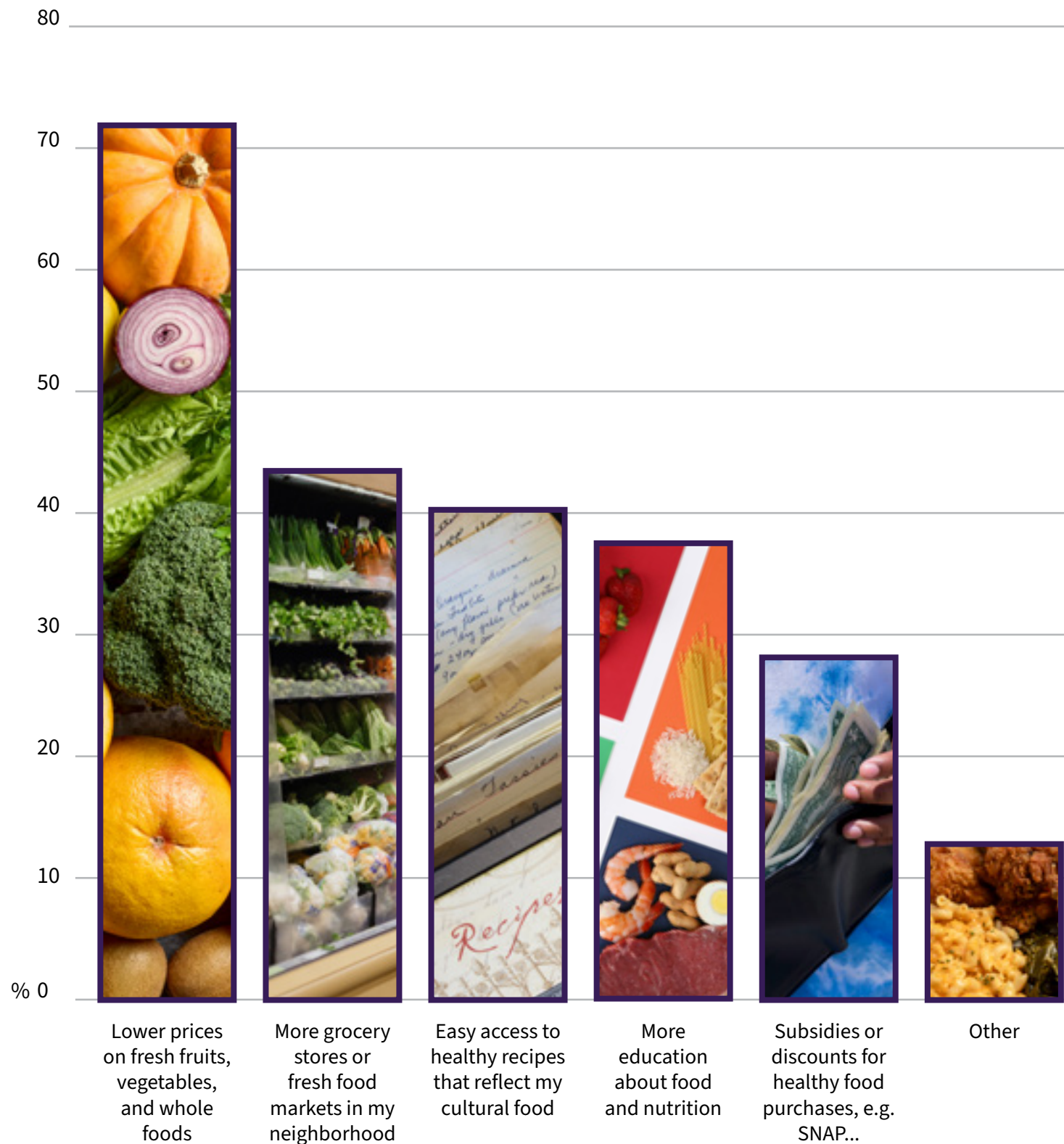
Has a doctor, nutritionist, or other healthcare provider ever spoken to you about your diet or eating habits?



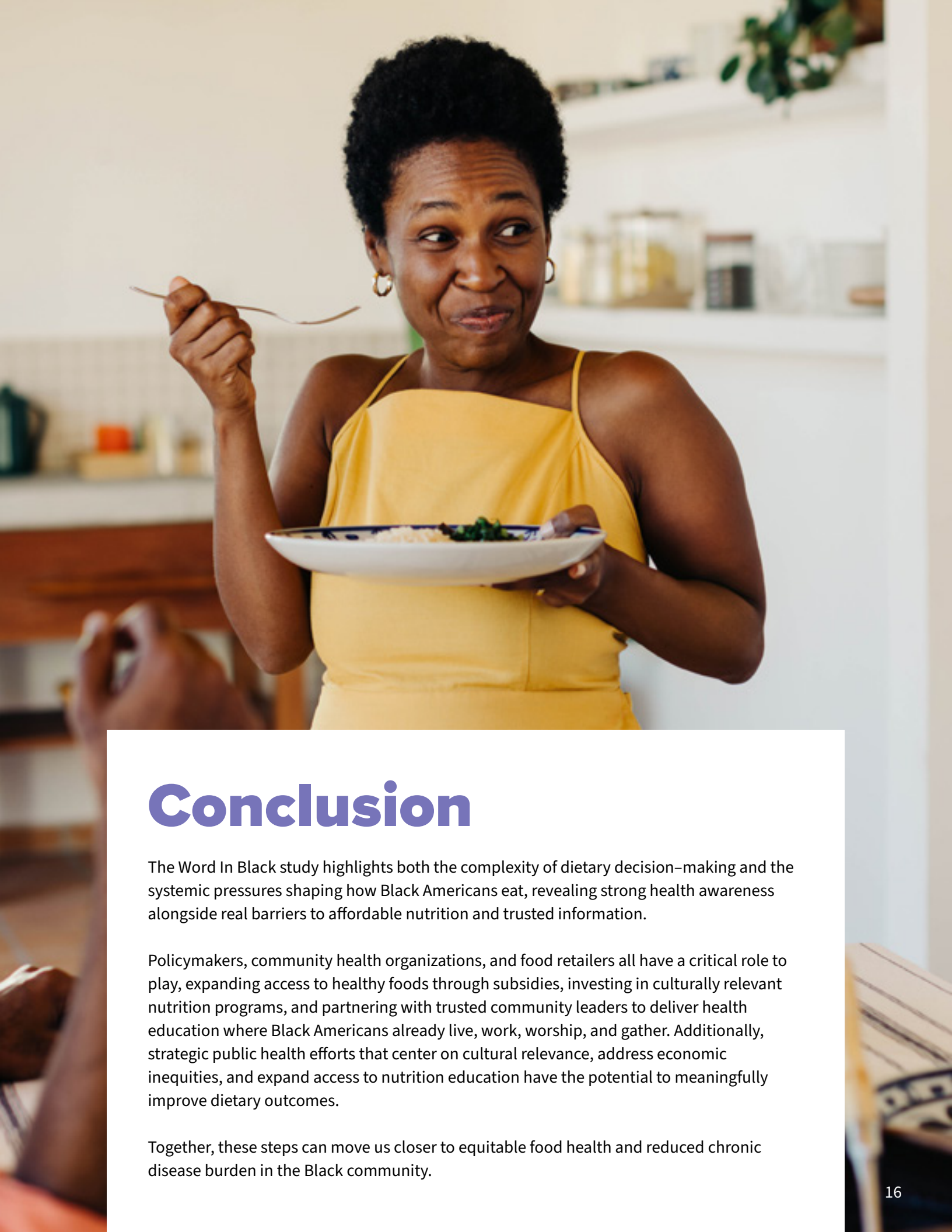
Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff

Figure 12.

What would make it easier for you to eat more healthily?



Source: Word In Black Insights & Research Division 2026 Reader Survey of Black Americans on Food & Health, (Apr. 22–Jun. 8, 2026) Credit: Christa Mahlobo, Ph.D.; Kyle Rickhoff



Conclusion

The Word In Black study highlights both the complexity of dietary decision-making and the systemic pressures shaping how Black Americans eat, revealing strong health awareness alongside real barriers to affordable nutrition and trusted information.

Policymakers, community health organizations, and food retailers all have a critical role to play, expanding access to healthy foods through subsidies, investing in culturally relevant nutrition programs, and partnering with trusted community leaders to deliver health education where Black Americans already live, work, worship, and gather. Additionally, strategic public health efforts that center on cultural relevance, address economic inequities, and expand access to nutrition education have the potential to meaningfully improve dietary outcomes.

Together, these steps can move us closer to equitable food health and reduced chronic disease burden in the Black community.

About Us

Word In Black Insights & Research Division

Word In Black was launched in 2020 in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, in partnership with 10 of the nation's legendary Black publishers and the Local Media Foundation. In 2025, with support from the MacArthur Foundation and the Knight Foundation, the organization launched the WIB Insights & Research Division.

The division delivers authentic, data-driven insights about Black America grounded in perspectives shared directly by people in the communities we serve. Through trusted publishing partners and deep community relationships, we execute large-scale quantitative and qualitative research initiatives and turn data into narratives that inform storytelling, strategy, and solutions. Led by scholars and practitioners committed to the flourishing of Black communities, our work empowers, informs, and drives positive impact.

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Acknowledgments

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