



# Teens and food: Do they know the facts?

## Poll report

Poll 41, April 2026



### Report highlights

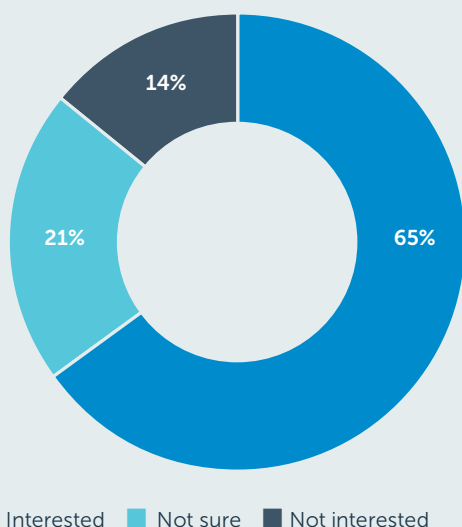
- Two in five teens (41%) cannot cook a basic meal but most (65%) want to learn how.
- More than 90% of teens and parents do not know the Australian dietary guidelines of vegetables, proteins, grains or dairy.
- Many teens hold misbeliefs about diets: half (54%) believe high-protein diets and one in four (23%) believe low-carbohydrate diets are better for teens' health.
- More than a third of teens (38%) have protein shakes, powders or bars and a third (32%) have energy drinks at least once a week.

## Cooking and meal habits at home

Being able to plan and cook meals is linked to more stable diet patterns and better nutrition, which ultimately improve health.<sup>1</sup> Teens and parents were asked a series of questions regarding their ability and willingness to cook. Although the majority of teens (59%) say they can cook a basic meal, more than one third (36%) say they can only prepare a snack, and 5% cannot cook a basic meal or prepare a snack. While one in five teens (21%) never help make the family dinner, a third (35%) say they help on one night a week, and one in seven (14%) say they help most nights (four or more) of the week. According to parents, in half of cases (54%) the reason for teens not being able to cook a basic meal is because they are not interested in learning to do so. However, when teens themselves were asked, two in three (65%) say they would like to learn to cook a basic meal (see *figure 1*). Parents reported other reasons why their teen cannot cook a basic meal, such as it is not safe for them to cook (19%), they create too much mess (18%), and they are too young (15%) or do not have time (12%). One in seven parents (15%) say it is not important for their teen to learn to cook and/or no-one has time to teach them.

Healthy meal habits at home are known to improve family nutrition, family functioning, and child mental health.<sup>2</sup> These habits include the family having dinner together and not having the TV on or phones at the table. More than half of teens (59%) say their family eats dinner together most nights but 40% say they have the TV on, and 24% have phones at the table most nights. The

### Teen interest in learning to cook



Percentage of children aged 12–17 (n = 667)

Note: All proportions are weighted by teens' sex, age, SES and state

Figure 1.

## Nine in ten parents and teens do not know how many vegetable serves teens need each day



majority of teens (82%) say that most nights of the week, they eat dinner that was prepared at home, with one in five having takeaway or ready-made meals most nights. Teens who eat a home cooked meal most nights of the week are more likely to be able to cook themselves, with 62% being able to cook a basic meal compared to 45% of those who eat a home cooked meal less frequently.

Parents were asked what makes it difficult for them to cook dinner at home. Almost half of parents (46%) say they are too tired to cook and one in three (35%) say they do not have enough time. One in five (20%) say they do not have the ingredients or that ingredients are too expensive (19%). Eight percent of parents say they find cooking too stressful and 7% say that their children prefer food that is not cooked at home.

## Knowledge of Australian dietary guidelines

Teens and parents were asked a series of questions to assess their knowledge of the Australian dietary guidelines. These guidelines recommend the amount of the five main food groups that teens should eat each day for health and wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> Although half of teens (54%) say they know what the five main food groups are, one third cannot accurately identify what they are. Overall, only 37% of all teens can identify each of the five recommended food groups. Few teens know how many serves of each of the individual food groups someone of their age and sex should consume according to the Australian dietary guidelines, with the majority underestimating but also a considerable number overestimating the amount needed. The highest level of knowledge pertains to serves of fruit, with 35% knowing the recommendation, followed by 7% for vegetables, legumes or beans, 4% for protein, 2% for

## Teens' misbeliefs about food and nutrition

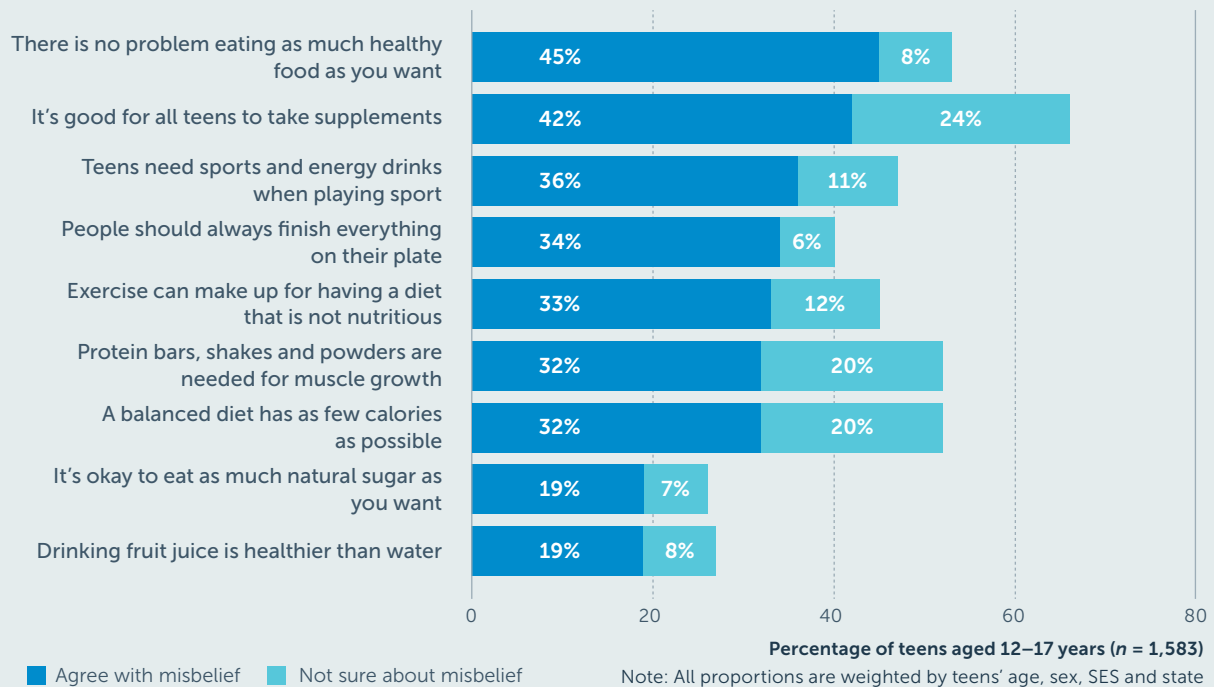


Figure 2.

grains, and 2% for dairy and alternatives. In relation to fruit, 25% underestimate the serves recommended and 29% overestimate; when vegetables are considered, 78% underestimate the serves recommended. Of note, one quarter of teens (25%) overestimate the recommended serves of protein and 59% underestimate. The vast majority of teens (83%) significantly underestimate the recommendations for grains, with most believing it is five serves less than the actual recommended amount.

Although knowledge levels among parents were marginally higher than those of teens, they were also poor. Very few parents know how many serves of each of the food groups a teen should consume, with the majority underestimating the requirements. Similar to teens, the highest level of parent knowledge pertains to serves of fruit, with 40% having the correct knowledge, followed by 9% for vegetables, legumes or beans, 3% for protein, 2% for dairy and alternatives, and 1% for grains. In relation to fruit, 25% underestimate the serves recommended and 28% overestimate. In contrast, approximately four in five parents (78%) underestimate the serves of vegetables recommended. One quarter of parents (23%) overestimate the recommended serves of protein and 65% underestimate. Nine in ten parents (88%) underestimate the amount of grains teens should eat and four in five (80%) underestimate the number of serves of dairy and alternatives recommended.

### Nutrition beliefs and misbeliefs

Advertising and online influencers can have powerful impacts on nutrition knowledge, food preferences, and consumption – especially among young people.<sup>4</sup> Teens were asked a series of questions to assess their general nutrition knowledge, as well as that related to particular foods and supplements that are often promoted and marketed in the community.

### Impacts of eating habits on health

The vast majority of teens know the importance of good nutrition; they say a balanced diet has a wide variety of foods from the main five food groups (87%), and that diet can impact mood and wellbeing (80%). There are, however, some important gaps in teen food literacy: one in four (27%) are unsure or do not know that teen eating habits have a lifelong impact on health, and one in three (30%) do not know childhood eating patterns continue into adulthood. One in three (33%) falsely believe that exercise can make up for a diet that is not nutritious. Almost half of teens (44%) believe that eating as much food as you want is not a problem, as long as it is 'healthy' food. One in three (34%) believe people should always finish everything on their plate (see figure 2).

## Misbeliefs about teen diets

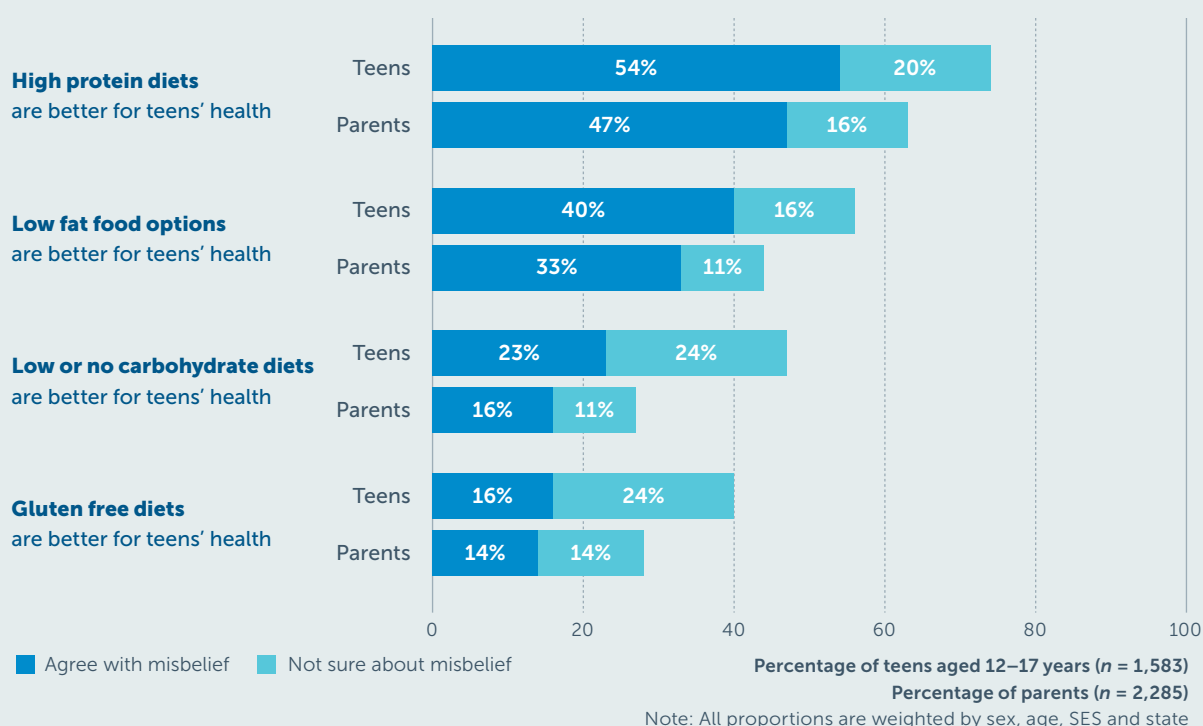


Figure 3.

### Teenage diets

There are widely held misconceptions about the types of diets that are best for teens. The majority mistakenly believe (54%) or are not sure (20%) if high-protein diets are better for teens' health, half believe (40%) or are not sure (16%) if low-fat foods are better, and almost half believe (23%) or are not sure (24%) if low-carbohydrate diets are better for teens' health (see *figure 3*).

Parents also hold similar misconceptions about the types of diets that are best for teens, although generally parent knowledge is better than that of teens (see *figure 3*).

Over half of parents mistakenly believe (47%) or are not sure (16%) if high-protein diets are better for teens' health, one third of parents (33%) think low-fat foods are better for teens, and 11% are unsure. Sixteen per cent believe and 11% are not sure if low-carbohydrate diets are better for teens' health.

### Supplements and energy drinks

Just under half of teens (42%) say it is good for all teens to take supplements and one quarter (24%) are not sure. However, one third (35%) recognise it can be harmful for teens to take supplements and one third (30%) are not sure, suggesting a high level of confusion around supplement use. Approximately one third (36%) believe teens need sports and energy drinks when playing sport. More than a third of teens (38%) report having protein shakes, powders or bars at least once a week and a third (32%) have energy drinks at least once per week.

### Implications

This report highlights that although teens recognise the importance of nutrition, there are significant gaps in their knowledge, skills, and behaviours in relation to food choices and habits. These gaps have implications for long-term health outcomes. Most teens know that diet affects health and wellbeing; however, very few teens or their parents know the Australian dietary guidelines, especially the number of recommended serves of vegetables, grains, dairy, and protein. These widespread misunderstandings, combined with widely held diet myths such as high-protein or low-carbohydrate diets being better, suggest that nutrition education is not effectively reaching teens and their parents. These low levels of nutrition knowledge can increase the risk of poor lifelong eating patterns and chronic health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.<sup>5</sup> Schools and public health initiatives should prioritise clear, and practical nutrition education, and include applied learning such as meal planning and food label reading. This approach will also help counter misinformation shared online and in media.

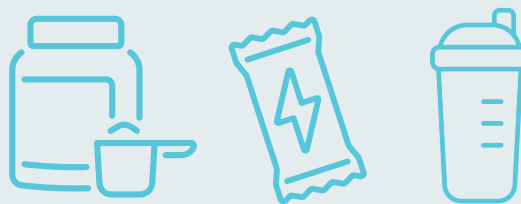
A major implication from our findings is the lack of cooking skills among teens, despite strong interest in learning. This skills deficit is likely to drive reliance on convenience and takeaway foods, reducing diet quality and limiting independence in adulthood. The ability to

cook even a basic meal is strongly associated with better nutrition in both the short and long term.<sup>1</sup> Expanding access to hands-on cooking programs in schools and community settings could help build teen confidence and teach them practical skills. Family environments also play a critical role in child nutrition and can support the development of food skills and knowledge in children. To be effective, interventions will need to target parents as well as teens, and include family-focused education, support for simple and affordable meal planning and guidance to improve the frequency and quality of shared mealtimes.

The findings of this poll suggest that parents and teens alike have extremely low levels of knowledge regarding the Australian dietary guidelines for the five main food groups, with most not realising how many serves of vegetables, dairy, and grains are needed. Guidelines need to be more accessible and practical to enable and empower families to make healthy food choices. The findings also point to the strong influence of social media and marketing, reflected in high consumption of protein supplements and energy drinks, along with confusion about their benefits and risks. This has implications for both health and regulation, as these products may displace nutritious foods and promote performance- or appearance-driven eating habits. Many adolescents rely on online content for information about health, fitness, and diet<sup>6</sup>, yet much of this content is unregulated, commercially driven, and not evidence based. Strengthening public health messaging, improving media literacy among young people, and more tightly regulating marketing targeted at teens are important steps to reduce misinformation and risky consumption patterns.

The low levels of food literacy revealed by this report highlight the need to support parents and teens and address false or misleading nutrition claims. Overall, the findings suggest that a coordinated approach, combining education, family support, and policy action, is needed to improve knowledge and behaviour and to support teens in developing healthy, sustainable eating habits for their long-term health and wellbeing.

**41% of teens** have protein shakes, powders or bars at least once a week



## Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively for The Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne by the Online Research Unit. The survey was administered from 12 to 21 January 2026 to a randomly selected nationally representative sample of Australian parents aged 18 years or older by age, sex and state of residence. All parents had at least one child aged 12 to 17 years of age who was also invited to participate in the survey. The survey comprised two questionnaires – one completed by a parent or caregiver, and the other by their child aged 12 to 17 years. For parents with more than one child in the target population, one child was randomly selected to participate. Both parents and children responded to close-ended questions assessing their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours in relation to nutrition among adolescents. The response rate among eligible parents was 91%, with 2,285 completing the parent questionnaire. Of these, 1,595 (70%) provided consent for their child aged 12 to 17 years to participate. All children whose parents consented agreed to participate and completed the child questionnaire, resulting in 1,595 parent-child dyads. The estimates presented in this report are based on these 1,595 children and the 2,285 parents who completed their respective questionnaires. The data have been weighted to reflect the demographic distribution of the Australian population, using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

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