HEALTH

Marion Nestle still believes that ‘calories count’

A Q&A with leading nutritionist Marion Nestle, author of the new book ‘What to Eat Now’

Marion Nestle. Courtesy Peter Menzel

By Sarah Todd Dec. 2, 2025

Reporter, Commercial Determinants of Health

Marion Nestle doesn't understand why people are so obsessed with her diet. Yes, she's one of the world's leading nutrition experts, a molecular biologist, and the author of 15 books that cast a withering eye on the ways business interests have conspired to make the foods Americans eat less healthy and less safe. It's natural that people might be curious about how, and whether, she practices what she preaches. Still, she said, "I just can't believe people care."

If you must know: She enjoys a good bowl of shredded wheat.

Fueled by fiber, Nestle is one of today's hardest-working crusaders for food system reform — an octogenarian with a cloud of curly white hair who retired from New York University in 2017 but maintains a bustling work schedule that includes sending out her Food Politics newsletter five days a week. (She travels, too: On a recent trip to Manaus, Brazil, she met with indigenous leaders to talk about the incursion of ultra-processed foods in their communities, then headed off to see the Amazon.) She also spent the past four years putting together her book "What to Eat Now," a revised edition of the book she first published in 2006. The new book is much longer, she says, a testament to how much has changed in the past two decades, from the rise of plant-based meat to the widespread availability of cannabis edibles. "It's my version of the great Western novel," she said wryly.

Leafing through the 700 pages of "What to Eat Now," readers may start to worry that there aren't many good options available. Unsafe meat makes an estimated 3 million Americans sick each year. Wild fish are disappearing from the world's oceans, but farmed fish are high in carcinogenic PCBs. Trying to parse out which ultra-processed snack foods are healthier than others "puts you on a nutritional slippery slope." Even seemingly virtuous blueberries may have been

spritzed with pesticides before traveling two weeks to the grocery store, ready to mold as soon as they land in the fridge. Alternatives like organic, locally-grown foods are sometimes available, but at a higher cost.

The impossibility of navigating these dilemmas is Nestle's point: Her ambitions with the book go well beyond helping individual people make better choices at the grocery store. She wants Americans to demand better from the food system, voting with their wallets and actively advocating for stronger protections and regulations from their government. (Whatever one's opinion of the Make America Healthy Again movement, its rise shows there are a lot of people in the U.S. ready to mobilize around healthier food.) Food choices, Nestle writes, are "about democracy in action."

Nestle spoke with STAT about the problem with food safety regulation — "the whole system is corrupt," she said, why the U.S. dietary guidelines should ditch the MyPlate and go back to the food pyramid, and her controversial stance on calories.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

You say a lot has changed in the food industry in the past 20 years. Has the change been for better or worse?

I would say it's the same because the issue is the same. The issue is profits to shareholders, and that's the fundamental issue that underlies everything having to do with the food system. Once you get that, everything that they do makes sense.

And even when health trends are being pushed by more of these food companies, that doesn't necessarily translate into healthier food for consumers?

Not unless it's profitable. So one of the big changes that seems to me to be a positive change is the move away from full-sugar Coke and Pepsi to the flavored bottled waters. It doesn't solve the plastic problem, but it certainly cuts down on calories and sugar, and that seems to be a move forward.

I'm not in favor of bottled water because I think it makes people not support their local tap water system, and not advocate for their local tap water system. Tap water is really fine in most cities.

Do you drink the tap water in New York?

Oh yeah. It's one of the best. And I went to the water treatment facility in Ithaca, and I was really impressed — not just with what they were doing, but with the concern of the people who worked there about the quality of the water and how seriously they took it, how much testing they did.

That's reassuring to hear, because I came away from your book worried about the safety of our entire supply. It sounds like food companies aren't necessarily doing what they need to do to keep the food supply safe, and then the regulatory system, in some cases, isn't up to the challenge of supervising closely.

It's been destroyed. It was always a problem and the FDA has always been underfunded, but now the FDA is dysfunctional.

If leadership was going to really prioritize safety issues, where should they start?

They have to enforce. Because what happens is, if there's no enforcement, everybody relaxes. What you have to have in a production facility is a culture of food safety, which means that everybody on board who has anything to do with food production has to care deeply about food safety at every minute. The minute you lose that culture, accidents happen.

I actually went into a production facility for an alternative meat product, very fancy, very high end, and I was just horrified by what I saw. There was a USDA inspector there who didn't see what I saw, and it was perfectly obvious.

What did you see?

Their one control point was to heat the product to a temperature that would kill all the bacteria. They did that, and then they took the product out, which was in an open dish, now completely sterile, and they moved it into a refrigerated room in which a blast of cold air from the ceiling blew over these products to cool them very quickly. They were uncovered. I said, Aren't you worried about listeria? They said, "No, we've never had a problem." And three weeks later, they had a problem with listeria. They had to recall a year's worth of production.

Is that often true that regulators are checked out, or was this an exception?

Because it's done with user fees, the whole system is corrupt. You get paid by the company, so you don't want to offend the company. That's the food safety system. It doesn't work very well unless people are absolutely diligent about it and never let up.

The problem is so pervasive, but there's not really a way to eat that would protect you from these issues.

You have to cook everything. Every time you eat something raw, you're taking a risk. It's not a big risk, but heaven help you if you're the unlucky one.

Speaking of money, one of the problems you talk about in your book is how there are conflicts of interest on the dietary guidelines committees. Is it impossible to get rid of those conflicts, given that it's hard to find people in nutrition who haven't accepted funding from one industry or another?

I think they can find people without conflicts of interest, but they don't work very hard. And it is pervasive, because the general culture in the nutrition field is that it's OK to accept industry funding because the funding is independent from the science.

But there's so much evidence that funding influences the research question and the interpretation of the results. It doesn't show up in the conduct of the science. I've seen many, many studies that come out with neutral results. They're

invariably interpreted as favorable. And they'll use the word "may" — the study shows that eating this product *may* reduce your heart risk of heart disease by 40%, that kind of thing.

I wrote my book "Unsavory Truth," which is about food industry funding of nutrition research. I've never been invited to speak about it at a university. It was completely ignored by the nutrition profession. It's like it was shunned.

People don't want to change the way that the system operates?

Well, they can't on their own. I mean, I have sympathy for that — if your job depends on your getting grant money, and you can't get grant money from [National Institutes of Health] because it's competitive. But these are marketing studies. In my view, they should be published in the Journal of Industry Funded Research, because you could predict the outcome if you know who the funder is.

The big news with the new dietary guidelines, or what's expected to be the big news, will be the saturated fat change.

The research hasn't changed. It still shows that if you substitute saturated fat for unsaturated fat, you raise the risk of higher blood cholesterol and heart disease. But [health secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.] is into beef tallow, for heaven's sakes. This seems like not a good idea to me.

I can't wait to see them. They're going to be amazing.

Do you have any other predictions about what they might say?

I have no inside information at all. What I've heard is they're going to reinstitute the food pyramid but upside down.

That would be interesting. What do you think of the plate versus the pyramid?

I much prefer the pyramid. It needed some tweaking; it should flip the grains and vegetables, so the vegetables are on the bottom and grains are above it. But the rest of it was fine.

Nobody understands plates. The purpose of the pyramid was to demonstrate hierarchy, that it was better to eat things from the bottom of the pyramid than from the top, and that step was much, much better understood with the pyramid than it was with plates. They looked at plates in initial research and discarded them because people did not understand them.

What about the idea that they'll turn the pyramid upside down?

Again, that research was done for the original pyramid, and people didn't like it. They felt it was unbalanced and it didn't make sense.

Also on the MAHA front, it seems like one way that the industry is evolving is by getting rid of not just dyes, but any kinds of preservatives or additives. But then they'll still sell potato chips, just with fewer ingredients in it. Coming away from your book, it seems like you'd see that as a positive change?

I don't know. You take the dyes out of food, they're still the same food. M&Ms with natural colors are still M&Ms. The most profitable foods are the junkiest, and that's a problem for the food industry. But I'm not sure that reformulation is the answer because you still have the same product.

What do you think is your most controversial opinion on food?

That calories count. Nobody wants to talk about calories. But 75% of American adults are overweight or obese. That's because they're eating too much. And one of the reasons why they're eating too many calories is because they're eating foods that promote calorie consumption.

The Lancet came out with three enormous papers on ultra-processed foods, and I'm an author on two of them. These papers review the evidence for how these foods are associated with poor health outcomes, in large part because they encourage people to eat too many calories without realizing it. A lot more calories, hundreds more.

What about calorie counting? I think that there's been a shift away from that because people find it not helpful.

You can't do it with any kind of accuracy, unless you're reading things with food labels on them and you're measuring the amount that you eat, so you know exactly what the volume is of what you're eating and can compare it to the food label. But the minute you have two bites more, you're taking in more calories. And you can't tell how many calories are in food by looking at them.

So calories matter when it comes to figuring out the health effects of food, but they aren't a helpful tool for the individual person, is that right?

I think that's a fair way to put it.

Even in the face of such a problematic food system, what's a simple change people can make to eat more healthfully? I think I remember you saying in your book that eating a serving of fruit or vegetables with every meal is a good place to start?

That works.