



The Wellness Councils of America Presents...
A WELCOA Expert Interview

Food For Thought

An Inside Look At Food Psychology And The
Unconscious Factors Causing People To Overeat



Brian Wansink, PhD
Director, University of Illinois
Food and Brand Lab

Brian Wansink, PhD is the director of the University of Illinois Food and Brand Lab, a series of test kitchens, restaurants and cooperating grocery stores used to understand how consumers "choose and use" foods. In this exclusive interview, WELCOA President David Hunnicutt, PhD speaks with Dr. Wansink about the psychological factors driving Americans to unknowingly overeat and fueling America's obesity epidemic.

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ABOUT THE WELLNESS COUNCILS OF AMERICA

The Wellness Councils of America is one of North America's most trusted voices on the topic of worksite wellness. With over a decade of experience, WELCOA is widely recognized and highly regarded for its innovative approach to worksite wellness.

Indeed, through their internationally recognized "Well Workplace" awards initiative, WELCOA has helped hundreds of companies transform their corporate cultures and improve the health and well-being of their most valuable asset—their employees.

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Topics Covered

- Q1:** How would you describe the state of nutrition in the United States today?
- Q2:** Brian, in addition to overeating, what do you see as additional factors contributing to America's weight gain?
- Q3:** What are some of the other environmental factors you've found contributing to America's increasing weight gain?
- Q4:** Given the convenient, diverse and low-cost nature of food today, are you optimistic about the future in terms of obesity?
- Q5:** Obesity is a major issue facing employers right now and the costs are extremely high. What advice do you have for or what have you seen companies doing to create a supportive environment for employees wanting to better manage their weight?
- Q6:** Let's talk about portion size and what people can do to better manage the amount of food they eat in one sitting.
- Q7:** How do people's shopping habits play into America's obesity epidemic?
- Q8:** How do stores—particularly grocery stores—affect people's shopping habits?
- Q9:** What advice would you offer an individual to maximize his or her trip to the grocery store?

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Dr. Wansink's Recommended Readings

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Food For Thought

An Inside Look At Food Psychology And The Unconscious Factors Causing People To Overeat

Brian Wansink, PhD is the Director of the University of Illinois Food and Brand Lab, a series of test kitchens, restaurants and cooperating grocery stores used to understand how consumers “choose and use” foods. In this exclusive interview, WELCOA President David Hunnicutt, PhD speaks with Dr. Wansink about the psychological factors driving Americans to unknowingly overeat and fueling America’s obesity epidemic.

Brian Wansink, PhD
Professor of Marketing & Nutritional Science and Director of the Food Brand Lab, University of Illinois



Brian Wansink’s (PhD Stanford University) research focuses on how ads, packaging and personality traits influence what and how much consumers eat. His research on consumption has won national and international awards for its relevance to consumers and has been featured in a variety of national news media.

In 1997, Professor Wansink founded the Food and Brand Lab at the University of Illinois. With the help of researchers from psychology, history, food science, cultural anthropology and agricultural and consumer economics, the mission of the Food & Brand Lab studies how to help consumers eat more nutritiously and behave responsibly. Dr. Wansink can be reached at Wansink@uiuc.edu. You can find more information about this topic at www.foodpsychology.com.

Q1: How would you describe the state of nutrition in the United States today?

WANSINK: I believe we’re faced with the question of whether we have the cognitive ability to do what’s right for ourselves, or whether we’re simply hardwired to respond to our environment. Personally, I believe it’s just too difficult for the average person to constantly remind themselves to not eat those cookies, to skip the fries or to pass on the extra handful of M&Ms. Because of this, I believe we’d be better off trying to change or control our environment in a way that helps us make better, healthier food choices. Better yet, create an environment that eliminates poor nutrition choices as salient options.

In creating such an environment, we need to focus on the factors that cause us unknowingly to overeat. Most people aren’t faced with the question of having the soup or the salad. They’re faced with the question of whether to have half of the soup and half of the salad or all of the soup and all of the salad. You see, most

people have a good idea about what’s good for them and what’s not. The real problem is that they have trouble understanding how much they should eat, or even how much they’ve eaten. Our stomachs can’t count. Once we start eating something, the evidence begins to disappear. The fact we have trouble understanding how much we should be eating is a major reason and an important factor in why so many Americans are gaining weight.

Q2: Brian, in addition to overeating, what do you see as additional factors contributing to America’s weight gain?

WANSINK: There are actually a number of interesting factors contributing to our nation’s weight gain.

Unfortunately, many of these factors affect people on an unconscious level and can, indeed, be very powerful. One of these factors is the size of food packaging. It’s amazing how something as simple as packaging affects our behavior, especially related to consumption. We’ve conducted about 47 studies looking at this very phe-



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David Hunnicutt, PhD
President,
Wellness Councils of America

David Hunnicutt, PhD, was named President of WELCOA in 1995. Under Dr. Hunnicutt's guidance, WELCOA routinely distributes millions of publications each year to its corporate membership of over 2,500 companies, and over 700 Well Workplaces. These publications are designed to increase quality of life, enhance employee productivity and improve personal health, and well-being.



Known for his pragmatic approach and strong background in organizational development and corporate leadership, Dr. Hunnicutt is widely recognized as a national wellness advocate. By dedicating his professional energies to advancing the cause of corporate wellness, Dr. Hunnicutt consults with hundreds of organizations each year including Merrill Lynch, Caterpillar, and the United Nations to help them link health promotion objectives to business outcomes.

nomenon. In a recent study, we gave half of our participants half-pound bags of M&Ms and the other half two-pound bags, each group with instructions to watch an accompanying video. At the end of the video we measured how many M&Ms were eaten, and we found those people with two-pound bags ate more than twice the amount of M&Ms than those people with the half-pound bags ate. OK, you might be thinking, “Of course the people with two-pound bags ate more M&Ms—there’s more of them to eat.” But the fact is no one can finish a half-pound bag of M&Ms in one sitting—especially without an insulin shot. In a similar study—to account for the volume of food contained in larger food containers—we gave half of the participants two-pound boxes of spaghetti containing only one-pound of spaghetti and we gave the remaining participants one-pound boxes of spaghetti containing one-pound of spaghetti. People with the two-pound box containing one pound of spaghetti consumed up to 30 percent more spaghetti than those people with the one-pound box containing one pound of spaghetti. Each had the same amount of pasta, the only difference was the size of the package the

pasta came in. We’ve learned from these and similar studies that larger package sizes encourage people to consume 19 to 45 percent more.

Q3: What are some of the other environmental factors you’ve found contributing to America’s increasing weight gain?

WANSINK: I see three other important environmental factors playing into America’s increasing weight gain—convenience, variety and cost.

In terms of convenience I’m talking about convenience foods or fast food restaurants—those types of things. These days you can’t walk a half-mile without running into a fast food restaurant. Fifty years ago, this wasn’t the case. In addition to the prevalence of fast food restaurants, convenience also includes the processed, great tasting, easy-to-make foods available today. Let’s face it. You don’t have to be Julia Child to make a great tasting meal today. A final component of convenience is accessibility. Nearly every floor of every public and private building has a soda pop and food vending machine today. All of these convenience factors work in concert with one another, contributing tremendously to the amount of food we consume. Any time we feel the urge, we can satisfy that urge.

The second important factor I see contributing to the obesity epidemic is variety. Take the Atkins Diet for instance. There’s a bunch a people on this diet and they appear to be losing a ton of weight—at least initially. The major reason people lose weight with this type of diet is because it’s such a restrictive diet. But you can only eat vegetables and beef three times a day for so many weeks. After a while, you get bored eating the same things over and over again. But we’re now seeing a number of



companies introducing Atkins-approved, low-fat, low-carb kinds of foods. All of a sudden the variety of “legal” foods available to people on diets like the Atkins Diet increases. Sooner or later, however, the newness and variety of such diets wears off and the diet becomes tremendously ineffectual.

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A similar issue is the variety of fast food restaurants operating today. There are people out there who eat fast food nearly every day of the week, and many more people who eat fast food at least a couple times a week, like myself. The large variety of restaurants allows a person to have hamburgers one day, fried chicken the next day, tacos the following day, and Subway on Friday. Because of the variety in restaurants, people can rotate restaurants and never really get bored, so they continue to eat poorly.

The third environmental driver related to America’s obesity epidemic is cost. Most fast food restaurants price their offerings next to nothing. In the United States, if you’re living at, below or near the poverty line, eating tasty foods from fast food restaurants is well within your budget. You can get an incredible meal at McDonalds or Burger King for less than four dollars. You get a lot of food—a lot of energy—for a small amount of money. Another part of cost includes the time element. It doesn’t take much more than 20 to 60 seconds to have a hot, fresh, tasty meal from a fast food restaurant. This was unheard of 30 years ago. The value fast food restaurants present to people—in terms of monetary and time costs—is certainly a reason for its increased popularity in the United States.

When you look at convenience, variety and cost, I think you’re seeing three of the most important, macro drivers of the obesity epidemic facing our nation today.

Q4: Given the convenient, diverse and low-cost nature of food today, are you optimistic about the future in terms of obesity?

WANSINK: I’m optimistic about some issues, but others concern me greatly. One of these issues is the efforts of a few well-intentioned, well-educated people who want to regulate the food industry and regulate what people eat. These folks believe people should only be allowed to eat fruits and vegetables, and they want to tax the companies providing non-nutritious foods. These efforts bother me—they’re frightening and some of them have a great deal of momentum behind them. But they’re not an effective solution to our obesity epidemic. In fact, I believe it undermines the efficaciousness of not just the food industry but also the fact Americans are free consumers. I’m very pessimistic about the results of such legis-



lation and the effects it could have on the food industry, especially smaller, family-owned producers and restaurants. Such regulations have potentially devastating effects because they may force producers and manufacturers to make costly changes which they may not be able to afford.

This isn't to say, however, that there aren't steps companies can take to help consumers. In fact, there are a number of things companies can do. Something I talk about in an upcoming book is de-marketing obesity—strategies companies can use to help consumers eat better, and still make a profit. I think it's a tremendous win-win situation for companies and consumers. We have to remember there exists a segment of the population that really doesn't care if they gain weight. There's another segment which is tremendously vigilant—it



Some chip manufacturers have created markers indicating the number of chips one has consumed, thus providing a natural stopping point for people to say, "OK, I think I've had enough."

doesn't matter what they do or what's going on—they won't gain weight. But there's a last group in the middle who says, "You know, I wouldn't mind losing a few vanity pounds," or, "I wouldn't mind doing a better job managing my weight."

This last segment of the population represents a tremendous opportunity for manufacturers to help consumers by developing products and packaging to help consumers eat better.

An example of de-marketing obesity can be seen in a study we did awhile back. We gave people a ton of candy—things like M&Ms—about 600 of them in a big plastic bag. We had them watch a movie while they ate the candy. We wanted to measure the number of M&Ms they ate. We gave another group the same amount of candy, only this time we broke it up into little segments of smaller bags. They had the same amount of M&Ms, only in a big bag containing a bunch of little bags—we call them sub-packages. We found sub-packaging provides a kind of natural stopping point for consumers. If you start grazing through a regular bag of candy, you don't really know or pay attention to how much you eat. You're pretty much on autopilot—mindless munching. When the candy is broken into small sub-packages, however, the consumer hits the end of a small bag and is forced to make a conscious decision about whether or not to dive into the next bag. Sub-packaging gives the consumer an opportunity to stop and reflect. It's a concept that makes a difference in the amount consumers eat, and it's easy for manufacturers to use. In fact, M&Ms is basically using it right now with its fun-size packaging.

There are other companies picking up on the concept of de-marketing obesity. We saw it in a study where we gave people a tube of potato chips. Some of the tubes had a line or marker every sixth or twelfth chip indicating something to the effect of, "Hey, you've eaten six or 12 chips." We found those markers, even though they didn't say, "You've just eaten 12 chips, fats!" provided a natural stopping point allowing people to say, "OK, I think I've had enough."



Q5: Obesity is a major issue facing employers right now and the costs are extremely high. What advice do you have for or what have you seen companies doing to create a supportive environment for employees wanting to better manage their weight?

WANSINK: Something we see in worksite after worksite are employees who say, “You know, I’m going to work through lunch today.” We’ve actually studied these “desk-diners” and found they actually believe they’re doing themselves a dietary favor by skipping lunch. The reality is, however, nobody really skips lunch—we eat something, and it may be three packs of cookies, a bag of potato chips, or a candy bar an hour later. What we found is the people who “skipped” lunch actually ate worse than the people who took the time to eat lunch. Invariably, people who skipped lunch believed they were doing themselves a great service.

When asked why they skipped lunch it was usually because they didn’t have enough time, or the cafeteria was too far away. So, one thing employers can do is alter the content of vending machines. A number of companies have been successful in providing healthier choices for employees getting lunch from vending machines. All they did is replace some of the non-nutritious items with low-fat options, fresh fruit or other healthful choices. Desk diners are often unaware of the costs—the calorie costs—of the food they consume at their desks. It’s the same kind of thing people do when they stand over the kitchen sink to eat something, and they forget to count the calories in the food they just ate.

The important point in all of this is you’re

not doing yourself a favor, and you’re not doing your employer a favor by skipping lunch. The work people do while skipping lunch—and I don’t know this for a fact—but the work people do while feeling disgruntled and self-sacrificed because they skipped lunch is probably of lower quality than the work they would do if they ate lunch. Sure, you may get an extra 45 minutes of work, but what’s the quality of that work?

Q6: Let’s talk about portion size and what people can do to better manage the amount of food they eat in one sitting.

WANSINK: One of the problems we’ve run into is the inability of people to easily visualize correct portion sizes. We’ve gone into a number of health and fitness camps—often known as fat camps to uncharitable people—and we’ve taken a look at visual illusions. We believe illusions have a dramatic impact on the amount of food people eat. One of these illusions is known as the horizontal-vertical illusion. It’s where you look at an upside down T and try to figure out whether it’s longer horizontally or taller vertically. Of course, both dimensions are of equal length—it’s just the illusion that throws people off.

Anyway, people often focus on vertical dimension and underestimate the horizontal dimension when judging sizes. At these camps, we gave people either tall, skinny 22 oz. glasses or short, wide 22 oz. glasses. People routinely poured about 32 percent more into the short, wide glasses than the tall, skinny glasses. Moreover, each person who over poured estimated that they poured less.

We’re doing similar types of studies with plate and bowl sizes, and found that the size of a plate or bowl has a dramatic impact on the amount of food people serve, and subsequently, consume.

We recently did a study at an ice cream



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DISPLAYED AT POINTS OF PURCHASE.
LET'S SAY YOU'RE HEADING TOWARDS A PARTICULAR
AISLE AND YOU SEE A SIGN THAT SAYS,
"SOUP, NO LIMIT PER PERSON." ON AVERAGE,
A PERSON WILL BUY THREE OR FOUR CANS OF SOUP.
NOW, IF THAT SIGN SAYS, "SOUP, LIMIT 12 CANS PER PERSON,"
PEOPLE PURCHASE, ON AVERAGE, SEVEN CANS
EVEN THOUGH IT'S NOT ON SALE."

social where we gave some people huge ice cream bowls and others medium-sized bowls. Regardless of bowl size, neither could be fully filled without it being a completely ridiculous amount of ice cream. When you gave people a large bowl, holy cow! They typically served themselves 40% more than those folks with medium sized bowls. When we asked the people with larger bowls how many calories they served themselves, they wouldn't believe they served any more than those people with smaller bowls.

Q7: How do people's shopping habits play into America's obesity epidemic?

WANSINK: One of the habits we've taken a look at is stockpiling—purchasing a ton of food in big packaging. We intercepted people in Sam's Club parking lots, and

asked them if they wanted to be involved in a study. We told them we'd give them a whole boatload of products. I mean we gave these participants dozens and dozens of products from all sorts of categories. We gave them things like 12 packs of cookies, four packs of popcorn; all sorts of stuff. Over a two-week period we tracked how having an exaggerated or stockpiled amount of food in the house affected eating habits. During the first seven days, we found people ate stockpiled foods—especially convenience foods—twice as frequently as those who were given the same food items in lesser, normal quantities. I think people thought to themselves, "Geez, Louise, look at all this stuff. We've got to get rid of it to make room for something else."

Another factor we've examined is how access to food affects eating habits. In a number of secretaries' offices, we put 30 Hershey Kisses in either opaque or clear jars and placed them either directly on their desks or six feet away. These secretaries believed they were being rewarded for filling out a questionnaire. In reality, we'd go in at night, measure how many Kisses were eaten and refill the jars back to 30 Hershey's Kisses. We did this over the course of two weeks and tracked how much they ate. We found, when the candy was placed on the desks, subjects ate nine Hershey Kisses compared to four when the jars were located six feet away. We also found that the Kisses in the opaque jars, which were harder to see, were also eaten less frequently.

Just having to walk a couple of steps for food had a dramatic effect on the number of Kisses people ate. And you might be thinking, "What's the big deal, we're only talking a difference of five Hershey Kisses." Well, that's 125 calories a day, and over the course of a month, consuming 125 calories per day means you'll weigh an extra pound at the end of the month. These are just a few of the small, psychological missteps that contribute to overeating.



People purchase up to 30 percent more when they're exposed to multiple-unit pricing (e.g., 3 for \$3 versus 1 for \$1).

Q8: How do stores—particularly grocery stores—affect people's shopping habits?

WANSINK: Stores themselves have a great impact on peoples' shopping habits. We often see people with a reasonable idea about what they intend to purchase thwarted as soon as they walk through those sliding glass doors. We often see people space out after making their brand decision (i.e., what brand of products to purchase). People put much less thought into how many of something they're going to buy compared to which brand or what kind of item they're going to buy. As a result, people are very suggestible to numbers displayed at points of purchase.

For instance, let's say you're heading towards a particular aisle and you see a sign that says, "Soup, no limit per person." On average, a person will buy three or four cans of soup. Now, if that sign says, "Soup, limit 12 cans per person," people purchase, on average, seven cans even though it's not on sale. The anchor point for the quantity purchased starts at 12 because of the sign. It's the only number for which to base the decision of how many to purchase because it wasn't thought about before seeing the sign.

We've seen a similar phenomenon occur when people are exposed to signs advertising 3 for \$3 versus 1 for \$1. People purchase up to 30 percent more when they're exposed to this type of multiple-unit pricing. In a number of college neighborhoods, we set up an experiment in Quik-Shops where we placed a sign near the Snicker's bars that read, "Buy 12 for your backpack." Mind you, they weren't on sale; they were regular price. The typical person, when exposed to our sign, purchased two or three, compared to the average person who purchases only one candy bar.

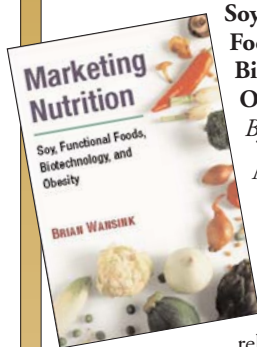
In essence, the first number we are exposed to, especially while shopping, tremendously biases our behavior because it's the first number we adjust up or down from. People can easily avoid this problem by establishing a reference number before entering the grocery store. When people make shopping lists, they really need to include the number of each item they intend to purchase.

A final issue related to grocery stores is product placement. Specifically, the more visible a product is, the more of it people buy. Take for instance products placed on end caps (end of aisle displays) versus being imbedded on the shelves. Even if items aren't on sale, there's a 40 percent increase in sales because of the product's increased visibility. It's largely based on people thinking, "Well, I really didn't need to buy those 'Cheese Its,' but oh boy, do



DR. WANSINK'S RECOMMENDED READINGS

If you're interested in learning more about the topic of marketing nutrition, you won't want to miss any of the readings Dr. Wansink recommends below.



Marketing Nutrition: Soy, Functional Foods, Biotechnology, and Obesity
By Brian Wansink

Available in October 2004, Dr. Wansink's new book tackles a number of important topics

related to how environmental factors and marketing contribute to people's eating habits. In *Marketing Nutrition*, you'll learn what steps manufacturers can take to de-market obesity, how food labeling biases consumers and encourages the tasting non-existent food elements, and how biotechnology will play an increasing role in nutrition in the United States. To pre-order your own copy of *Marketing Nutrition*, visit Amazon.com.

Environmental Factors that Increase the Food Intake and Consumption Volume of Unknowing Consumers
By Brian Wansink (2004)—*Annual Review of Nutrition*, Volume 24, 455-479.

Can Package Size Accelerate Usage Volume?
By Brian Wansink (1996)—*Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 60:3 (July), 1-14.

The Influence of Assortment Structure on Perceived Variety and Consumption Quantities
By Barbara E. Kahn and Brian Wansink (2004)—*Journal of Consumer Research*, 30:4 (March), 519-533.

Bottoms Up! The Influence of Elongation and Pouring on Consumption Volume
By Brian Wansink and Koert van Ittersum (2003)—*Journal of Consumer Research*, 30:3 (December), 455-463.

How Visibility and Convenience Influence Candy Consumption
By James E Painter, Brian Wansink, and Julie B. Hieggelke (2002)—*Appetite*, 38:3 (June), 237-238.

When are Stockpiled Products Consumed Faster? A Convenience-Salience Framework of Post-purchase Consumption Incidence and Quantity
Pierre Chandon and Brian Wansink (2002)—*Journal of Marketing Research*, 39:3 (August), 321-335.

An Anchoring and Adjustment Model of Purchase Quantity Decisions
By Brian Wansink, Robert J. Kent, and Stephen J. Hoch (1998)—*Journal of Marketing Research*, 35:1 (February), 71-81.

The Marketing Battle Over Genetically Modified Foods: False Assumptions about Consumer Behavior
By Brian Wansink and Junyong Kim (2001)—*American Behavioral Scientist*, 44:8 (April), 1405-1417.

The Variety of Assortment
By Stephen J. Hoch, Eric L. Bradlow, and Brian Wansink (1999)—*Marketing Science*, Vol. 18:4, 527-546.

they look good." They purchase the product regardless of whether or not it's on sale. So, visibility is an important element.

Q9: What advice would you offer an individual to maximize his or her trip to the grocery store?

WANSINK: First and foremost, though they seem like the perfect solution, grocery lists aren't always good. The problem with writing grocery lists is that they often increase the amount of time people spend in the store, and thus encourage people to spend more money on impulse items. If you write a grocery list, it's important to give yourself a time limit, and include it at the top of your grocery list. People who spend as little time as possible at the grocery store are less likely to spend money on impulse items—they get exactly what they want and they get out.

People could also try a technique I call spot shopping. You see, most people are zig-zag shoppers. They enter the store, take a right through the produce section and cruise up and down each aisle. Sure, they might skip the cat food aisle, but the result is the same—they purchase a lot more than they intended to. When you're on a seek-and-buy mission—a spot-shopping mission—you say, "I'm hunting for these five items," you go to where you think they are, get them and you get out. Spot shopping is mission-focused; it keeps a person on track and keeps the budget down.

Consumers should also watch out for special promotions on indulgent, impulse-type products. It's one thing to see a cents-off promotion where you save 30¢ on a bag of M&Ms, but it's another thing to buy a bag of M&Ms with the chance of winning an all-expenses-paid trip to Disneyland. Promotions like these are very powerful in influencing our purchases of indulgent products.



People also have a habit of purchasing products they never use. We did a study where we went to peoples' homes and asked them to pull an item from their cupboard that they purchased more than three years ago and which hasn't been used. Nearly everybody we talked to could find something. In fact, 93 percent of the people were able to do find an item like that in their cupboards. When we asked them why they purchased that item, we found it was because they were overly optimistic. They're usually overly optimistic because when they shop, they start thinking about how much fun it would be to have the neighbors over for dinner. As a result, they buy all sorts of ingredients for beef Wellington or whatever else sounds good at the time. But when the time comes, dinner with the neighbors didn't work out and they've got all this stuff for a special recipe just sitting in the cupboard. And do you know when the next occasion will be? Not any time soon. It usually never happens and three years down the line, everything you purchased for that one occasion is still sitting in the cupboard. Believe it or not—and I'm not kidding when I say this—we found people who had canned whale meat left over from

World War II, things they had kept through five moves, or things mothers had passed to their daughters.

The important point is consumers should make attempts to be realistic. Try making special purchases only after confirming that the neighbors are, indeed, coming over for dinner. Moreover, if people insist on being optimistic about get-togethers, they should try purchasing flexible food items (canned corn instead of canned okra)—ingredients and items that can be used in more than one situation.



ABOUT THE WELLNESS COUNCILS OF AMERICA

The Wellness Councils of America is one of North America's most trusted voices on the topic of worksite wellness. With over a decade of experience, WELCOA is widely recognized and highly regarded for its innovative approach to worksite wellness. Indeed, through their internationally recognized "Well Workplace" awards initiative, WELCOA has helped hundreds of companies transform their corporate cultures and improve the health and well-being of their most valuable asset—their employees.

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