

Dietitians weigh in on top 2023 nutrition trends

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Each year that passes amplifies how vital health and wellness are to the pursuit of living our best lives. We constantly look to the latest trends in nutrition, exercise, and emotional well-being in the hope of finding better ways to nourish and strengthen ourselves. 2023 will be no different. What is becoming more critical though, is the need to be able to sort the fads and fakes from affirming, sustainable strategies that will truly support enhanced well-being.



We asked a team of dietitians, all spokespeople for [Adsa](#) (Association for Dietetics in South Africa), to share their expertise on seven of the top nutrition trends for 2023.

1. Forget fad diets, think no-diets and weight wellness instead

Over the past couple of years, there's been a clear move away from weight loss management towards weight wellness. There's a strong call for more kindness towards people who are overweight and obese, and a much louder calling out when it comes to fatphobia and fat-shaming. The body positivity lobby has called into question that overweight equals unhealthy, and concepts such as 'Health at Every Size' (HAES) are being taken up in the dietitian community.

Registered dietitian, Retha Harmse says: "I really hope that this trend grows in leaps and bounds this year. It's time that it is widely recognised that shame has never been an effective motivator for change. Compassion-focused behaviour change theory emerging from the eating disorders field suggests that self-acceptance is a cornerstone of self-care, meaning that people with strong self-esteem are more likely to adopt positive health behaviours. It's important to note that there are 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' people at all points on the size spectrum. What dietitians like about this trend is that everyone gets treated with decency and respect, and no one gets stigmatised. Health, including mental health, is prioritised and not just weight. Health-promoting behaviours are emphasised rather than weight-reducing actions, which are often not sustainable or healthy. One of the aims of weight wellness is to reduce weight cycling because studies have found that this is worse for health outcomes compared to no dieting at all."

2. Navigating the fragmentation of nutrition and health beliefs

While there's never been better access to sound nutritional and health information, it is swimming in oceans of fads and false information. Lifestyle and wellness influencers hold massive sway over their social media followers and online communities. Driven by novelty, they are not shy about giving advice on foods, diets, fasting, supplements, functional foods, and nutritional trends even though they have no qualifications to do so. In contrast, registered dietitians are qualified and regulated health professionals that assess, diagnose and treat dietary and nutritional problems at an individual and wider public-health level. Registered dietitians are the trusted nutrition experts to provide evidence-based, sound nutrition recommendations.

Faaizah Laher, a Gauteng-based registered dietitian says: "Studies are showing that people are increasingly using social media sites such as TikTok as their main and trusted source of nutrition information. Food and diet trends come and go, much like fast fashion. There's a 'big money' industry around these fads. If you are an ardent follower of lifestyle influencers, here are seven questions you should ask yourself before jumping onto the 'latest and greatest' diet trend or diet trap. If you answer yes to two or more, then maybe that trend is not the healthiest for you:

1. Does the 'diet' advocated exclude whole food groups, or does it seem to be balanced?
2. Will I be able to follow this trend for longer than three months without feeling deprived or isolated from my peer or friend group?
3. Does it exclude foods that I love?
4. Will I need to cook my food separately from the rest of my family?
5. Do I need to buy expensive or specialty products?
6. What degree or qualification does this influencer have?
7. Does the hashtag include thinspo/weight loss/lose weight/diet to enable people to catch onto and find 'thin-narrative' trends easily?

3. Integrating eating into self-care and rejecting self-harm

Self-care is set to continue as a mega trend in 2023, and Intuitive Eating has emerged as a gentle way to integrate eating in the self-care framework.

Retha Harmse says: "Intuitive eating is embedded in a self-care framework and oftentimes a lot of the diet and lifestyle fads can be put to bed by asking if it would be seen as self-care. For example, would starving oneself count as self-care? Would punishing yourself with strenuous exercise and abnormal restriction not fall in the same category as self-harm? Would it count as self-care to use very tight waist trainers to attain the hourglass figure? Unfortunately, we have developed such unhealthy relationships with food that we easily consume powders and concoctions, but we fear normal food items like bread. Intuitive eating moves us away from disordered eating and idealising thinness towards body awareness, appreciation and trust, mindfulness, enjoying our food and relaxing into making healthier food choices. Intuitive eating guides us to rejecting the diet mentality and challenging the food police. Instead, we can make peace with food, honour our hunger, and focus on respect for our bodies."

4. Caring for the environment via our food choices

Awareness of the impact of our lifestyles and food choices is ever-increasing, and likely to be a significant influence on people in 2023. Concern over human impact on the planet is driving the incorporation of more plant-based foods in our diets and efforts to reduce our food waste. It's also having an impact on innovation in the food industry, driving new and different product development such as plant-based milks, lab grown meats and plant-based meat alternatives.

Registered dietitian and Adsa spokesperson, Kgadi Moabelo says: "Our eating habits and food choices are clearly and strongly linked to health and the environment. Our choices of food drive its production and affect the environment in the forms of energy use, polluting emissions, and other waste. The processing, high processing and ultra-processing of foods is one current trend to meet the needs of growing populations. However, this trend is not deemed sustainable because of its poor health effects and the high impact on the environment. This year, we are likely to see an ever-increasing focus on incorporating more plant-based foods and making some reductions in meat consumption. This is in line with some of the

popular healthy diets recommended by experts such as the Mediterranean diet, which advocates for more plant-based food and less meat and meat products. The high cost of living is set to be a fixture of 2023 and consumers will be looking for ways to make their monthly budget stretch. This could lead more consumers to curb their food waste and also focus on including cheaper, but highly nutritious foods such as pulses and legumes, in their family eating regimes.”

5. To fast, or not to fast?

Fasting continues to be widely promoted as beneficial for weight loss, blood sugar control, heart health, brain function and decreasing inflammation. There is a phenomenal increase in fasting apps providing people with regimes, calculators, and motivational guides, making it easy and tempting for novices to try out fasting.

Faaizah Laher says: “Every new diet or wellness trend comes with a fascination attached to it. Everyone wants to live longer, detox better, prevent mental and brain illnesses, and decrease inflammation. But with every fascination, the benefits are exaggerated, risks are downplayed, and science takes the backseat. Individuals considering intermittent fasting for weight loss or other benefits must remember:

- What is my source of information? Is it a book or website? Does the author profit financially from me buying their book, reading their blog or watching their video? Is this website or social media site a source of the person’s income?
- Fasting is not safe for everyone. Children, pregnant women, or the elderly, who are at risk of losing muscle mass should avoid fasting.
- Time restricted eating is not for people who cannot control their appetite and are prone to binge eating. If you are more likely to consume the entire kitchen and the sink during feasting periods, then fasting is not for you.
- Apps can be a way to get started if you are keen to try fasting. But be mindful about your lifestyle and habits that may get in your way.
- Have you tried making any lifestyle changes before embarking or committing to a new way of eating?
- Some of the side-effects of fasting include dehydration, headaches, increased stress levels and disrupted sleep cycles. Fatigue, heartburn, and indigestion have also been reported.

6. The foodless approach – are nutritional supplements a food solution?

The nutritional supplement and protein supplement markets are huge, and ever-increasing. There’s a fringe movement towards making food less important in our lives with an argument that modern science and technology should move us away from our dependence on nature for our food and towards a ‘foodless’ future.

Kgadi Moabelo says: “The role of supplements is to boost or complement the diet. They are not meant to replace food. The current use of supplements is for disease prevention and treatment. Routine supplementation is sometimes necessary, especially in communities where food intake is mostly energy dense and offers lower amounts of vitamins and minerals. When we choose a variety of healthier food options, and eat them in adequate amounts, it is likely that we do not need to be taking supplements. But certain conditions such as advanced age, illness and recovery, vigorous levels of physical activities as well as the quality of our current foods will most likely require supplementation. Food is best, and obtaining vitamins and minerals through healthy food choices also provides additional beneficial nutrients, such as fibre and fluids. In fact, a high intake of nutritional supplements may depict poor food choices. Ideally, you should consult your dietitian or health professional before deciding on nutrition supplementation. If supplements are taken, monitoring is key to avoid toxicity as this is a possible outcome especially in cases where supplements are taken when there is no need. If you are feeling the need to boost your health and wellness through nutrition then increase your intake of fresh vegetables and fruit, wholegrains, pulses and legumes. Aim to make healthier food choices and enjoy balanced meals.”

7. Understanding Food and Mood

There’s a growing interest in the impact of food on brain function and mental well-being. New studies are shining a light on how diet may impact on common mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety.

Retha Harmse says: “Mental health and emotional well-being have been in the spotlight over the past few years. In line with

this, the emerging concept of 'Food and Mood' has sparked quite some interest not only in the foods which may affect mood but also in how our gut-health, or gut microbiome affect mood. When you don't eat enough nutrient-rich foods, your body may lack vital vitamins and minerals, often affecting your energy, mood, and brain function. Some examples are a lack of selenium which may increase feelings of depression, while low intake of iron leads to lethargy and fatigue. You should aim to get your vitamins and minerals from eating a healthy, balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables but in certain circumstances or for certain people, supplements may be beneficial. For example, all women planning pregnancy should supplement with folic acid, and iron supplements can help people diagnosed with anemia. With a global focus on improving mental health, it's most likely that we will see increasing research into the impact of food on mood in the coming years. There's a lot still to discover and study. If you are considering making changes to your eating in order to manage a mental health condition, it's important to get the support of a dietitian, as these are our health professionals with the latest, science-backed nutrition expertise."

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