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Faculty Abstract

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Researching & Communicating Nutrition in the 21st Century.

ABSTRACT: From the earliest discoveries of vitamins and minerals, nutrition science has traditionally relied upon reductionism to answer significant questions of diet and health. Still today reductionist thinking pervades the discipline, as embodied in the “single nutrient paradigm” that dominates nutritional epidemiologic research. Dependence upon reductionist thinking has limited our ability to uncover dietary truths and effectively communicate life-saving research results. In essence, reductionism does not account for the complexity of food itself, which includes myriad elements that work in concert to impact health—nor does it reflect how people actually eat. The notion of examining diet as a whole rather than as individual nutrients or foods is based on the theory that the entire diet is the principal determinant of health, particularly in matters of chronic disease prevention. Novel methods to study “dietary patterns” emerged in the 1980s and exploded in the past decade, expanding greatly the ways in which nutrition studies are conducted. This growing body of literature has revealed that a plant-based diet is related to a decreased risk of chronic diseases like obesity, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes. As a result, dietary guidelines and recommendations are increasingly focused on the complete diet rather than single nutrients and are thus more comprehensible to the public. The next big challenge for nutrition is going beyond the individual in the study of why what we eat matters and communicating the science in a way that stimulates food choices that create a healthier planet, as well as healthier people.