

Keto in focus, part four: 'It's the latest incarnation of low carb...'

foodnavigator-usa.com/Article/2022/04/20/Keto-in-focus-part-four-It-s-the-latest-incarnation-of-low-carb

foodnavigator-usa.com



Keto products at this year's Expo West show. Picture credits: Elaine Watson

Related tags: [keto](#), [keto diet](#), [ketogenic](#), [Mattson](#), [Hartman group](#)

In part four of our series on the high-fat, moderate protein, ultra-low-carb keto diet, FoodNavigator-USA checked in with experts at consumer insights specialist Hartman Group, and product innovation company Mattson to get their take on whether it is a trend or a fad.

While **Mattson** has worked on some keto projects, research suggests that the percentage of people following a strict keto diet such that they are in a state of ketosis (burning stored fat, not carbs), is relatively small (single digits), such that many CPG companies are therefore looking to reach a more nebulous, but broader audience of people keeping their eye on carbs, said Al Banisch, EVP new products strategy.

"I think keto will stick for a while, although I think the vast majority of the people on 'keto diets' aren't really on keto diets [they are not in a constant state of ketosis]," he speculated.

"I think it's the latest incarnation of low carb. We did a quantitative consumer study and in terms of what was important to consumers about the keto diet, it was all about reducing carbs. And in fact, the more protein the better.

“So, they were certainly not putting themselves into ketosis. They were simply feeling they're getting the protein they want, and feeling good about the fat, but almost none had macro goals like getting exactly 75% of their calories from fat and so on.”

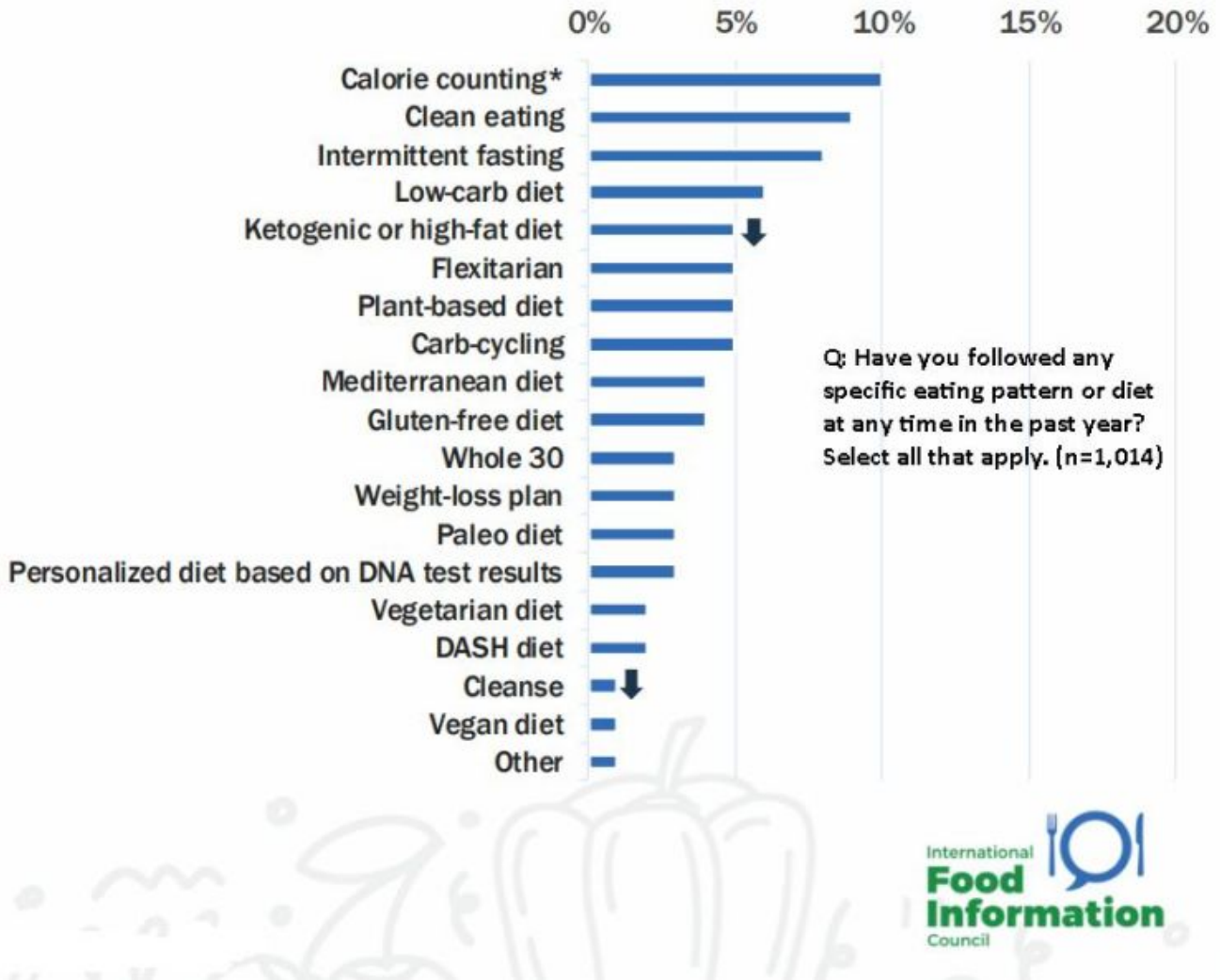
'It's just really hard to sustain...'

Mattson president and chief innovation officer Barb Stuckey added: *“People will use keto as a tool for quick weight loss, but the reason I think it's not going to be around forever is it's just really hard to sustain unless you have a condition that you are trying to manage [through the keto diet, such as epileptic seizures].”*

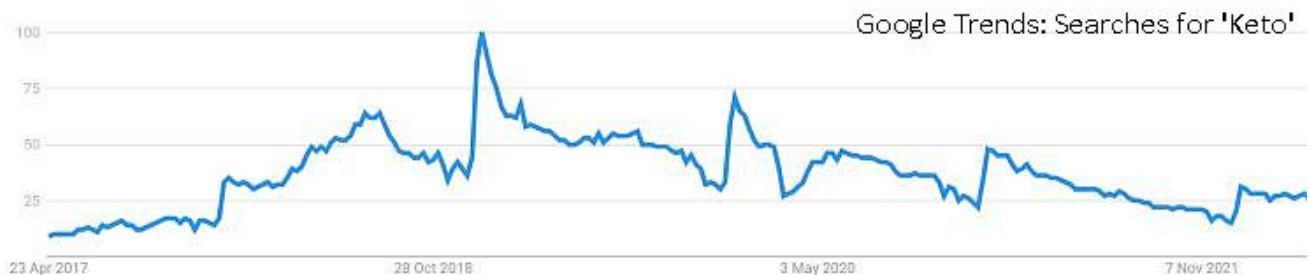
Lisa Pitka, senior food technologist, added: *“Some of our clients are very much about being keto and being certified and following really strict guidelines, but the vast majority I would say of the products on the market are really appealing to the 'keto friendly' consumer.”*

This of course is potentially a somewhat problematic or at least ill-defined term (ketogenic.com has a **keto-friendly certification** that attempts to define it, but some brands are using keto or keto-friendly as a kind of generic proxy for low sugar, which is not helpful if you're a strict follower of a ketogenic diet), noted Stuckey.

Type of Diet Followed



According to last year's IFIC food & health survey published in May 2021, around 5% of Americans claimed to have followed a keto diet at some point over the previous 12 months. This was a drop from around 8% in 2020. The 2022 survey will be out next month



Source: Google Trends, searches for 'keto' from the US, over the past five years (there is a similar trajectory for 'ketogenic,' 'keto diet,' 'keto friendly' and 'keto foods')

Keto formulations can be very pricey

On a more practical note for CPG companies already struggling with margins given soaring inflation, meanwhile, formulating products for strict keto dieters can be pricey, she observed.

“When you take the carbs out of a product, you're taking out the wheat and the corn and the soy, all of a sudden, you've got to figure out how to make a profit. You've got all that protein and in some cases expensive fats like avocado and coconut, and you've got cost of goods issue.”

‘Vomit-inducing’ flavors...

Formulating keto products can also present some unexpected sensory challenges if you don't know what you're doing, she added, highlighting the example of certain plant proteins and coconut fat, not always a winning combination.

“We've had issues with MCT oils being not very stable, and if you don't formulate properly with them, you can get some of the most horrific flavors you've ever had in your life, I mean vomit inducing, just really, really bad.”

That said, the keto formulator's toolbox is expanding as firms explore more different types of dietary fibers to meet macro goals (you calculate net carbs by subtracting grams of fiber from total carbs), said Pitka.

*“There are more options now beyond just using oligosaccharides, so you've got **resistant starches** and so on [which resist digestion and don't spike blood sugar].”*

Hartman Group: Keto diet has faddish qualities, but taps into trends with more staying power

Dr Shelley Balanko, SVP business development at **Hartman Group**, said its research suggested very specific diet trends (keto, paleo) tend to have a shorter lifespan, but that key tenets of both of these diets - a focus on high-quality fats (even if not everyone agrees on what this means), attempting to reduce carbs and sugar, and persistent interest in protein - all have staying power.

The tendency these days, she added, is for consumers to “*pick and choose*” aspects of different diets or approaches that reflect their values or fit with their lifestyle.

“They take kind of a pragmatic mashup approach.”



The fact that maintaining ketosis for any sustained period of time is so challenging means it's unlikely to gain significant traction among consumers, claims Dr Shelley Balanko at Hartman Group

Highly engineered products

Regardless of your views on the merits of following a keto diet for a sustained period of time, she said, the fact that maintaining ketosis is so challenging means it's unlikely to gain significant traction among consumers. *"And so for that reason alone, I see keto as more fad like."*

Another aspect of keto that makes it challenging for more health and wellness focused consumers looking for *"clean, fresh, real, less processed"* foods, is that many packaged foods formulated to meet certain macros are by their very nature pretty *"highly engineered,"* she said.

That said, as we've seen to some extent with gluten-free formulations, she observed, second generation products have attempted to address concerns raised by the first wave of products by focusing more on nutrition, taste, and cleaner labels.

The same evolution may also happen with plant-based products, she said, where right now, consumers are prepared to buy more 'processed' products with long unpronounceable ingredients lists because they believe they are making a more ethical or sustainable choice.

Not all carbs are the enemy...

"Some of the newer 'diets' advocate for the reduction of carbs as a whole...but we don't believe that's the best path to having a long term, healthy relationship with food," says Mark Samuel, founder and CEO at protein-fueled organic snack brand **IWON Organics**.

"It's true, not all carbs are made equal. There are good carbs: such as the ones from vegetables and fruit, even some grains, and there are bad carbs: think processed sugars from processed foods."

Highly restrictive diets don't teach and instill long term, healthy eating habits

The keto diet, like most diets, predicted Samuel, is likely effective for short-term weight loss.

"Do some diets work? Sure. Any restrictive diet will result in someone losing a few lbs. Often not even exercise is required. But it's short lived. Restrictions don't teach and instill long term, healthy eating habits. Habits we can all live with, forever, and feel good doing it."



"Diets don't lean into what's fact; that healthy proteins, fats and carbohydrates are good for us. They fuel our body, so long as we're eating foods rich in nutrients, and there's plenty to choose from. It's leaning into those habits that create a lifestyle, a lifestyle built on health. Then, add some exercise, a bit of sun, plenty of water, and good rest each night, and we'll have changed the world, one healthy individual at a time."